Papa no Iu Koto wo Kikinasai!

Volume 03

ダ-HI

パパのいうことを聞きなさい！3

松 智洋

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その時、祐太は次女美羽に七五三の写真がないことに気づいて……？
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交えて小鳥遊家大騒動のあったかハートフルラブコメ第三幕!!

パパのいうことを聞きなさい！3

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松智洋

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Papa no Iu Koto wo Kikinasai! Volume 03

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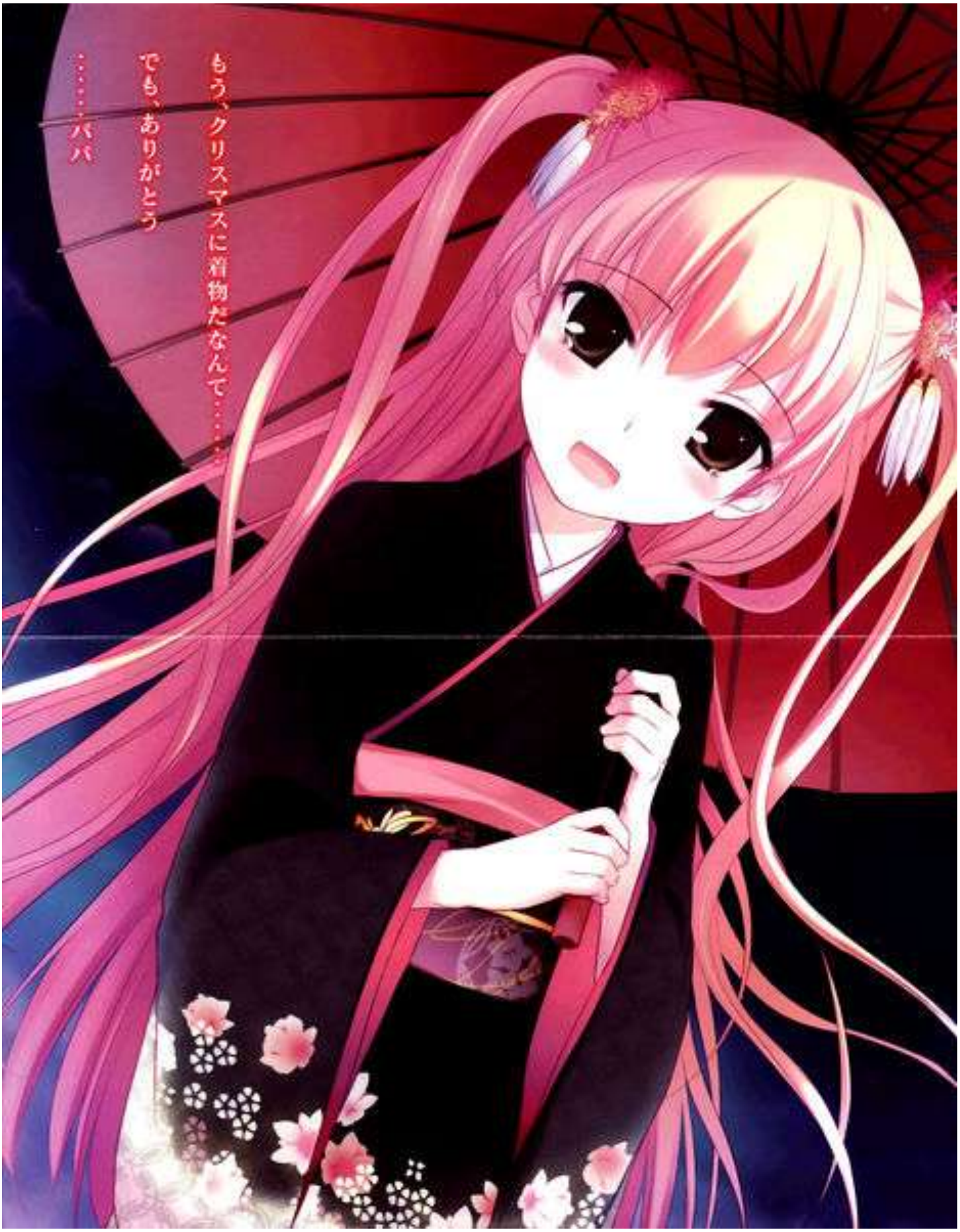
もう、クリスマスに着物だなんて……
でも、ありがとう
……パパ

Wishing to accomplish all of the matters that people treat as natural is actually unexpectedly hard.

Prologue

The oldest memory engraved in my mind is Nee-san wearing a kimono when she was younger.

Though it is a hazy memory that I cannot recall even the time or location of, only Nee-san's expression and the pattern of the kimono on her are exceptionally vivid in my memory.

Nee-san was probably a primary school student that time, and thus, this should be a memory from when I was three or four.

Our parents were still present, so I think I was probably carried by dad or mom, looking at Nee-san's silhouette. Not the least concerned with the long sleeves of the kimono, she ran quickly on the paved ground.

I could still remember Nee-san running before a huge door, turning around to wave at me.

On the kimono made of black cloth, there were beautiful pictures of flowers. When the sleeves that had a trace of maturity waved along with the movement of Nee-san's hands, it looked as though the sakura petals were dancing in the wind as well. Nee-san seemed to like the kimono very much as well, and I would sometimes see her taking it out from her cupboard, staring at it in deep thought.

However, the kimono disappeared some time before this.

It happened when our parents passed away, when we had to live together, and the first time that Nee-san moved to another house with me.

We tidied up the articles in the house, and sold the house that a family of four once lived in.

The kimono was probably lost about that time. So that I could go to college, Nee-san gave up on a lot of things, suppressing a lot of feelings as well.

The fact that Nee-san's interests and smile were not lost in her hard life made me respect her very much.

After that, Nee-san married her husband. Though their age was somewhat distant, he was quite nice, so she still managed to enjoy a happy life in the end— Things should have been so.

However, Nee-san suddenly disappeared because of an air crash.

The only thing that I can do now is to properly take care of the three daughters that Nee-san left.

That's right, I— Segawa Yuuta, became the 'Papa' of those children just like that.

It was a bright and sunny day. We started our new life of a family of four at the Takanashi residence at Ikebukuro, and were facing an important phase.

The youngest among the three sisters— My niece, Hina, that I am so proud of, is having her Shichi-Go-San.

Not long after this, we are going to bring Hina to a shrine to pray. The sky of Ikebukuro today is sunny without a trace of clouds in the sky, as though it is celebrating the memorable day as well. After all, since Hina is so cute, the gods definitely like her as well.

As the main character, Hina is currently changing her clothes. Oba-san specially came to our house, and put on a red kimono over Hina's nagajuban.

"Hina, extend your hands over here."

"The sleeves are so~ long! Oba-tan, what is this? Why is this so long?"

Hina curiously waved her sleeves.

"This is called a '**tamoto**', Hina-san."

Tamoto = Sleeve pouch

"Ta~ O~ To~? So this is a 'taoto' huh. Mnn, Hina understands. The taoto are so~ long ♪"

It's a tamoto, Hina. Ah, so this is called a 'tamoto' huh, not a '**sode**'? To be honest, I just learned the word 'nagajuban' which would be the thin shirt worn beneath the kimono, myself. I originally thought that it was a yukata.

Sode = sleeve

"Oba-san, erm…… There doesn't seem to be a sash……"

Sora-chan worried after rummaging the bag containing the yukata.

"Ah, you can just use this for a sash."

In Oba-san's hands was a long cloth used to fix children's yukatas, and it somewhat contrasted with the magnificent kimono.

"Eh?"

Sora-chan's reaction exposed her confusion, and I did not understand as well.

”Letting a three year old use a traditional sash will bring her discomfort, and there is ‘**hifu**’ as well, so that should be enough. It was worn like this in the past.”

Hifu = A type of garment for the upper torso worn with a kimono.

Oba-san, who finished putting on the accessories on Hina’s kimono, did not have a hint of slowness in her movements.

Having a pale pink coat (that seems to be a ‘hifu’) worn over her red kimono, Hina looked overwhelmingly cute! If there was a beauty competition for children wearing traditional Japanese clothing, Hina would definitely be the champion.

Though it was near winter, the scene with a trace of spring made Hina’s surroundings seem to have a hint of warmth.

”Uuu~…… It feels hot.”

That’s true, dressing up like that in the house will make one hot. After all, wearing a kimono means putting on quite a few sets of clothing.

”You look very cute like this, Hina, so please be patient. Here, you’ll have to wear a hair clasp as well.”

Miu-chan said while inserting a cute, colorful hair clasp that feels like it would be popular with the kids in Hina’s set hair.

”That’s all…… Right?”

”It’s going ding, ding, ding!”

This time, Hina didn’t wave her sleeves, but her head that had a hair clasp on it.

”Wow~ Ding, ding ding ♪”

”Hina, if you move your head too forcefully, your hair clasp will fall down.”

”Hina-san, stand still and let me have a look.”

As Oba-san walked backwards slightly to take a look at Hina’s clothing, I approached as well.

After all, I must admire the cute appearance of our little princess in detail as well.

”Hina, Hina, don’t move so much. Make a cute pose.”

”Cute pose? Like this?”

”Yes, yes! Just like this!”

Making poses along with Miu-chan, Hina is absolutely, supremely cute!

I am not exaggerating! I can assure you that she must be the cutest three year old girl in the whole world!

”Well then, I shall go ahead first.”

”Okay, thank you for your trouble.”

Oba-san headed to the shrine a step earlier than us. It seems like she has to meet the people at the shrine and the Oji-sans of the Takanashi family, to deal with some matters for us. Not only that, even the kimono Hina is wearing right now, Oba-san……

Ding dong! The doorbell rang right after Oba-san left.

”Huh? That’s early.”

”Se~ Ga~ Wa~ Kun~! I~ am~ here~”

A familiar sound came from outside. Hey, Sako-senpai, aren’t you a bit too early!

”Everyone is waiting for you all at the shrine. I have to take photos from the moment Hina-sama steps out the door~ After all, I am Hina-sama’s personal photographer today!”

…… The person who decided without further ado to take part in the ceremony of Hina’s Shichi-Go-San would be Sako-senpai, the president of the Road Observation Research Society. Raika-san and the others would most probably be there as well, and as I recall, Shiori-chan said that she would be present too.

Oh well, it’s fine no matter how crowded the scene will be, as it’s our Hina’s Shichi-Go-San after all.

Though we went through various situations like the hurried school festival, Sora-chan falling sick because of exhaustion, and so on, it’s fortunate that the wish of the whole family that Hina would show up grandly on the day of Shichi-Go-San is still fulfilled today.

I think Nee-san and Nii-san are probably at a corner of the blue skies looking at Hina grandly dressed up as well.

The clear blue skies today makes people believe so.

Chapter 1 – Day of Shichi-Go-San

The papers on the table were not information used for my school report, but a few catalogues with colorful wrappings, while the ones flipping through them were Sora-chan, Hina and I.

”Hmm…...”

”Umm—m”

It was as if the moans that Sora-chan and I subconsciously made were gradually drawn out of the wide-open windows along the wind, and while lying in my arms, Hina looked at us in puzzlement.

After entering November, the air outdoors gradually turned colder, and due to the fact that the wind was rather strong today, the pages of the open catalogue on the desk kept fluttering, becoming a huge hassle for us.

I wished to close the windows as soon as possible, but since Miu-chan, who is in charge of cleaning today, decided to air up the house, we were ordered to keep the windows open before she returned.

However, the moans that we made were not related to the cold weather……

”Hmm…… How troublesome.”

I glared at the catalogue and moaned in a low voice again.

”Oi-tan, isn’t this cu~te!”

The person sitting on my lap was a person who tied the lush, black hair so similar to her mother’s into a bunch, using her large, dazzling eyes to look at me, a beautiful maiden…… No, beautiful toddler.

”Oh, Hina, so you like this one?”

”Mnn! It looks like a tasty stawberry~”

”Nono, clothes can’t be chosen like this……”

The books that were stacked on the table for some time were catalogues for rental kimonos.

As for why were we anxiously looking at these things, simply said, it was because of preparations for Shichi-Go-San, and the deadline was imminent as well.

Although I think everyone should know what ‘Shichi-Go-San’ is, if you really need me to explain, it’s just a festival to celebrate the growth of children by heading to shines to pray.

As it is held on the fifteenth of November when a boy is three or five, and when a girl is three or seven, it is known as ‘Shichi-Go-San’. And since Hina is already three, this year is the first year she celebrates Shichi-Go-San.

”Uuu~ This really won’t do! There aren’t any good ones at all!”

The girl who forcefully slammed her hand on the table, leaning forward to speak, would be my other niece— Takanashi Sora.

”After all, isn’t this the first time Hina celebrates Shichi-Go-San!? Even though the clothes are just used to take photos of, let’s not use rental ones, but just order a kimono specially for Hina! Besides, it’s not like we don’t have money now!”

The girl whose brown hair was fixed with silk ribbons that were used like hair hands declared in an agitated tone while pounding on the catalogues. For some reason, there is a strand of hair standing up like an antenna, but apart from that, she is a flawless young beauty as well.

But according to Sora-chan, that hairstyle seems to require that antenna (it’s called an ahoge, apparently) to be complete. The beauty standards of a middle schooler are so inexplicable.

However, although the cheerful maiden before my eyes is actually an introverted girl who is bad at dealing with boys outside, she is mysteriously forceful with me. Speaking of which, would this be because I, as the supporting pillar of the family, am too unreliable?

Logically speaking, I, as a guardian of the children, should sigh, and feel bad as I often make them worry about me, but being stared at by Sora-chan's large eyes, I couldn't help growing red in the face.

"What now?! Onii-chan!"

Though I wasn't sure if Sora-chan noticed my embarrassing reaction, her attitude of urging me to make a decision was actually quite reasonable.

Can this important stage of our little princess' life be dealt with using just a rental item?

Although to us, who must work hard without the care of adults, this is indeed an important sum of money, Hina's Shichi-Go-San is an important event that she has only two chances to experience in her whole life…… Okay, I know that I was exaggerating a bit when I said that.

"That's…… True. Isn't it fine to spend just a little money?"

Even though ordering it is quite hard considering the time and our financial state, if we just buy ready-made ones……

"Yes, yes. Hina's kimono must be blue with the shade of water, and the rentals don't have this color at all! Let's buy a kimono that suits Hina!"

Wait a minute, Sora-chan, I think there's a part of your statement that I cannot go along with.

A blue kimono the shade of water……?

"…… Wait a minute, the color suited for Hina, shouldn't it be pink?"

”What……?”

Our gazes clashed.

Sora-chan showed a gaze that was as if she were saying, *‘What nonsense are you spouting?’*

”The color that suits Hina is blue, of course!”

”She’s a girl, so of course she’s going to use pink!”

After hearing my words, Sora-chan said in retaliation:

”Thinking that everything a girl uses must be in pink or red is just too outdated.”

”Uuu…… But! Though Hina looks good in any color, the color that suits her the most should be pink!”

”Of course, I think that Hina is cute in clothes of any color, but blue is still the best!”

”No! Pink!”

”Blue!”

Sora-chan and I glared at each other with Hina between us.

This is actually a time when I should yield, as a man, and as an adult.

However, as Hina’s guardian, and as her Papa, I will not give in so easily.

”Hina, Hina likes blue, right? Don’t you like ice cream sodas?”

”Mnn! Hina likes ice cweam~”

”Ah! That’s despicable?!”

Sora-chan deviously roped Hina in.

”Hina, remember what you had yesterday? Milk with strawberries. You like that a lot, right? The milk will turn pink.”

”Mnn! That’s tasty too~”

Probably because she recalled its taste, Hina smiled radiantly, and although some saliva trickled out of her mouth, I’ll just pretend I didn’t see it.

”Onii-chan, that’s despicable!”

”What are you talking about, weren’t you the one who used devious tactics first?”

We glared at each other yet again.

”Onee-chan, aren’t you done yet?”

Miu-chan, who appeared at the entrance of the living room, looked at us in disbelief.

From the looks of her holding the vacuum cleaner, she was probably done with cleaning up upstairs.

After the lesson last time, the housework had been changed to a shift system, and the person in charge of cleaning today was Miu-chan. She closed the previously open windows, so it seems like the air in the house will be fresh once more, since the cleaning has been finished. I was relieved that I didn’t have to have cold wind blown on me anymore, thanking Miu-chan for her hard work.

The dreamily beautiful girl with blonde hair and long legs before my eyes would be the second sister in this family— Takanashi Miu. It is rumored that there are quite a few fan clubs of her in her school, but after seeing her appearance that rivals that of an idol, it would not be surprising to anyone.

As you can see, they are beautiful girls (and a toddler) of different types, but will still become the focus of everyone naturally. The three sister of the Takanashi family are quite famous in this area as well.

I— Segawa Yuuta, is a person that can be said to be the uncle of the beautiful three sisters.

Although all of the three sisters have striking features, unfortunately, only I am an exception.

I am currently studying at a normal college somewhere in Tokyo, my features are plain, and I don't have any special talents as well.

Well, that can't be helped. Though they are my nieces, I am not related to Sora-chan and Miu-chan by blood, and Hina is my only niece who is related to me by blood.

However, they are still my family, my daughters, that I, Segawa Yuuta, must guard preciously.

"You came at the right time, Miu. Say something as well. Hina's kimono should be blue like the shade of water!"

"No, we should get a pink one!"

Seeing us glare at each other yet again, Miu-chan shrugged slightly.

"Oji-san, seriously, please calm down for a moment. It's the same for you, Onee-chan. Didn't we decide to rent the kimono already? Hina will grow up in a flash, so she won't be able to wear it very long after we buy it."

Miu-chan was right. Her words made repentance appear on our faces.

In the business with the school festival, we nearly forgot about Hina's Shichi-Go-San, and in the end, we only started to prepare for it the day before yesterday. But even so, it's too much of a pity to let this event that

happens only twice in one's life pass sloppily, so me, Sora-chan, and the others are frantically making preparations.

But we haven't decided on the most important traditional clothing.

I think Sora-chan and Miu-chan probably took part in Shichi-Go-San before as well, but after looking through the large amount of clothes and cosplay costumes hidden in Nee-san's cupboard, I still couldn't find a suitable kimono.

A three year old grows up very quickly, so even if we buy a kimono now, it's impossible for her to wear it on her next Shichi-Go-San, so we made the more appropriate conclusion of renting one. Sora-chan and the others probably did that on that time as well.

"That's true. And Hina is slightly taller than before now as well."

"Really? Hina gwew up?"

Hina patted her head with her hand, asking in confusion.

"Didn't we measure our heights before this? Look, on the pillar over there."

Sora-chan pointed at a corner of the living room. Dates were written in detail over there in pencil, and the position of Hina's head was marked as well. She already grew 3cm from spring until now.

"Hina wants to grow as tall as Onee-tan!"

"Mnn, mnn, you definitely will."

Having Sora-chan pat her head while saying that made Hina slightly embarrassed.

Speaking of which, Hina and Nee-san are like peas in a pod, and it's unmistakable as I'm speaking as her brother.

When Hina grows up, she will probably become a beauty that looks like Nee-san.

Of course, that's quite worth looking forward to, but because of my stand as a substitute father, that is a very troubling issue as well.

For instance, when Hina is at an age when she goes to high school, bad intentions will definitely be born in the hearts of the males around her.

Receiving love letters, being asked behind the school building, the rooftop, or below the legendary tree.

And then…… A confession of love.

And, and…… Though I am unwilling to think of such a possibility, but if that man goes out with Hina from that time on…… Just thinking of that gave me the feeling that my gut was about to puncture.

And if the kid who claims to be Hina's boyfriend appears before me, I don't have the confidence to maintain the general moral ethics in the society.

"When Hina grows up, she will definitely become a beauty like Yuri-san. How exciting, Oji-san."

I don't know if Miu-chan noticed the thoughts in my heart, but she said that with a wide smile on her face.

"No! That won't do! Hina cannot have a boyfriend!"

"Onii-san, what nonsense are you……"

"Hina! You can't look for a boyfriend or something like that! You have to promise Oi-tan!"

"What's a boyfan?"

With her eyes widened, Hina asked in confusion.

If possible, I wish for her to stay innocent forever.

”It seems like Oji-san is turning out more and more like our dad recently.”

”Uuu……”

She hit a sore spot.

About half a year ago, Nee-san and my brother-in-law, Shingo-san…… Went missing in an air crash.

Needless to say, Shingo-san is the father of the three sisters, and spoils them a lot.

Facing his strong love, even I was nearly vanquished by his shoehorn sword.

I understand your feelings now, Shingo Nii-san…… However, perhaps I should still reflect on myself.

”I- In any case! Hina is super cute, so we must be more careful, especially that kid—“

”That kid, as in Katsuya-kun?”

A name that I am unwilling to hear came from Sora-chan’s mouth.

That kid is an evil child famous in this area. With an exceptionally arrogant attitude, he doesn’t know how to respect adults at all.

After we returned to Ikebukuro, allowing Hina to return to the kindergarten that she went to before moving to Hachiouji, I met……

I should say, the one that everyone knows except me……. It was a boy.

Well, I really don’t know whether he’s impolite or stubborn, but in any case, I don’t like him touching Hina now and then. And also, recently, he even…… Ah, whatever, I’ll disregard that for the moment.

In any case, don’t think that a mere three year old kid can extend his wolf’s claws towards our Hina.

”Why? Kacchan is a fran.”

”A friend, huh…… You cannot be deceived by such words. Listen to me, sooner or later, that type of person will turn into one who stirs up trouble, a terrible womaniz— Guwagh!?”

”Don’t teach Hina strange things like this!”

I was scolded by Sora-chan. But thanks to that, she seemed to have calmed down slightly.

”We’ll talk about the kimono tomorrow! We’re deciding after inspecting the actual thing at the shop renting out kimonos, is that okay?”

”O- Okay.”

Facing Sora-chan’s frightening anger, I could only give my assent, albeit unwillingly.

Hachiouji is very cold in the morning, having a coldness that pierces through one’s body.

Though it seems like I have once said similar words before, I still have to repeat it once again.

Wind blows down from the hills. A vast land without many shelters. And there’s the fact that it’s the morning as well.

With all of these conditions met, the campus of Tama Literary College is an extremely cold place. After finishing my job of moving stock that I took from last month, I, who was looking at Hanamaru-senpai driving a truck

away, went to a coffee shop to whittle away some time before the first period started.

As there was still more than an hour before the class starts, the view outside of the windows was almost deserted.

Speaking of which, the Liberal Studies class on the first period of Monday is basically a class that only people who lacks a lot of credits attend, like me, for instance. Because of that, I didn't have many people to talk to, and could only take a seat by the windows, finishing the contents of my water bottle all alone. By the way, the water bottle contains houjicha latte that Sora-chan made for me by waking up early in the morning, as I have to do part time work.

It is a simple drink that adds hot milk to strongly simmered houjicha.

Though it might sound somewhat disgusting, it's unexpectedly good.

Well, it counts as a type of milk tea, but it's fresher and smoother than red tea. Plus, it cools down slower because of the added milk.

The most important thing is, I'm really thankful for being able to drink a warm beverage on a cold day like this. While slowly tasting the houjicha latte, I leisurely looked out of the windows, trying to see if anyone I know would pass by.

When I was half finished with the houjicha latte, I noticed a familiar face pass by.

"Uuu…… Should I go and greet that person……?"

Though I originally planned to greet people that I recognize and know their names of, no matter who they are, but only the person before my eyes that time made me hesitate. As I couldn't make a decision for a long time, the other person noticed my presence as well.

”Oh! Segawa-kun!”

The person who greeted me with exceptional vigor today would be Sako-senpai.

”Coming here so early today, is there anything wrong?”

”What impudence, I arrive at the school every day about this time.”

Sako-senpai knitted his brows while saying those unexpected words.

Sako-senpai looks like an ordinary fat, scruffy man, but he’s actually a complete otaku.

Furthermore, his age and academic year is unknown, while his network of contacts has already surpassed mysterious, reaching an ominous realm. I only know that he is the first president of the club that I am in, Road Observation Research Society— ‘Roary’ in short.

Sometimes, he would say something like: ‘Your ○○○○ is exposed!’ as his signature line like a certain detective by deliberately mixing together Roary and **expose**, but he is still ignored by the others most of the time. By the way, over half of the people in our college doesn’t know of the existence of this club, while the people who do know even suspects that ‘Roary’ is ‘Lolicon Research Society’ in short, and I am one of the people being suspected.

’Roary’ and ‘exposed’ are pronounced similarly in Japanese.

And the fact that Sako-senpai, who is like this, actually goes to school so early every day, that was the first time I heard of it.

Speaking of which, I never saw him attend any classes at all. Though he proclaims himself as a ‘Third Year’, he already paused in ‘Third Year’ from a few years ago, which is why he is a extremely mysterious fellow.

Searching for meaning in the actions of this person feels like it would just be a waste of effort.

”However, your appearance is quite timely. I have some business with you.”

”Senpai, you’re…… Looking for me?”

”That is correct. Segawa-kun, until what time will you stay back today?”

”I don’t have any classes after the third period, so I plan to go back at noon……”

I was planning to take Hina to try on some kimonos after I went back. Of course, Sora-chan and Miu-chan would follow as well.

Sako-senpai said: “That would be troublesome.”, making a troubled expression after that.

”Okay! Before you go back, lend me some of your time.”

”That’s okay, but…… What business do you have with me?”

”That’s all, remember to go to the clubroom after this! Goodbye!”

Completely ignoring my words, Sako-senpai left with a speed that counts as quick for his round body.

When the long, meaningless class ended, I climbed on the long, steep slope.

My destination would be the club building at the highest spot in the campus.

About the Road Observation Research Society that I’m in, not only is the club activities incomprehensible from its name, its president is that Sako-senpai as well, so I always thought that Roary is just an unofficial club where people with similar interests gather.

But in truth, Roary is actually a club officially recognized by the college. How ominous.

Although I don't know what magic Sako-senpai used to make the college recognize the club application, in any case, since it's an official club, we have the right to use the club building as well.

Thus, Roary has its own clubroom, and I am headed there right now.

Of course, this is all because of Sako-senpai.

But from the time the school festival ended, I started to study, work and do the housework whole-heartedly, so I'm thinking that it's quite a good chance for me to show up at the club that I haven't been to for quite some time recently. But first, I have to make this clear, I am not a lolicon.

I have a proper aim. Thinking that made my footsteps lighter.

Walking for some time after climbing the not-too-steep, but frightfully long slope path, the steep stairs that are like cliffs could be seen. After climbing the stairs, a vast, open space could be seen— the field of Tama Literary College.

The club building is by the field. As its name suggests, it is a building that gathers all of the clubrooms. On lunch breaks, this place would be so crowded that it's extremely noisy, but for some reason, it was exceptionally cold that day.

Well, perhaps it's because of the remains of the school festival? Hills of various items could be seen everywhere, making me fully aware that not even two weeks had passed since the immensely chaotic school festival.

In the school festival that was held recently, us Roary presented a cosplay café. With the assistance of the three sisters that our family is so proud of, we were exceptionally successful on the day of the event, however…… Something tiring happened after that as well.

Sora-chan, who had overworked herself, fell sick, while I was scolded by a middle school boy as well.

Well, such matters made me value my responsibilities as a guardian even more.

While thinking of such matters, I pushed the door of Roary open.

”Good morning.”

Because of the blockade of the hill of rubbish, I could only squeeze into the clubroom from the half open door.

”Eh? That’s strange.”

For some reason, the clubroom was pitch black, but the door was not locked, and I didn’t meet anyone from the club on the way here as well.

Which means…… They went back without locking the door? Speaking of which, there aren’t really anything that people can steal in here in any case. But since there isn’t anyone here, what did I come here for? As I was having doubts about all that while extending my left hand to search for the switch for the light, my outstretched hand was suddenly caught by someone.

”Guwagh!?”

As I shouted out loud, a blinding light was shone on me.

Is this what they call being in the limelight? In the glaring light shone from below, someone’s silhouette appeared.

After that, jolly music rang all of a sudden, while the two lights weaved here and there in the clubroom, and when they crossed for the last time, the person that appeared there was—

”Nyan.”

It was Raika-san. And also, she was wearing the bunny girl costume that she wore during the school festival as well, making cute poses with a poker face on her angelic features as usual.

If one asks the male students enrolled at Tama Literary College: ‘Who is the fairest of them all in this school?’, most probably nearly ninety out of a hundred would answer: ‘Second Year Oda Raika’ And if asked: ‘Who is the girl with the largest breasts in the college?’ Most probably all among a hundred would say that it’s her.

And Raika-san, as a huge-breasted beauty, is now wearing an exposing bunny girl costume, greeting me in a closed room. Although this should be a situation that would bring one to the zenith of excitement, the sad thing is, humans have something that is known as an ability to learn.

”Err…… You’re doing some kind of ‘experiment’ today as well……?”

Acting somewhat like a wet blanket, I asked. Of course, my gaze did not shift away from her beautiful silhouette, and I was trying my best to keep my cool as well.

I should add this as well, if one asks: ‘If you have an opportunity to date Oda Raika, what are your plans?’, even though most of the men would consider for a moment, the final answer would definitely be ‘Impossible’.

Which means, as the sole female member of Roary, and as my crush, Oda Raika is a person like this.

”…… Nyan?”

”Umm…… You can stop fooling around now……”

Without changing her pose, Raika-san tilted her head slightly. When I had a closer look, I noticed that instead of bunny ears, Raika-san was wearing cat ears on her head. So that’s why she was saying ‘Nyan’?

Just when I was finally clear about the matter, a spotlight was shone elsewhere, while the one who appeared this time was Sako-senpai.

”Welcoooooooooooooome!”

Sako-senpai shouted so while holding a mike with his little finger pointed out.

What is wrong today?

”Hey! Come on! Mr. Segawa!”

While speaking English in an exaggerated tone, senpai waved his hand, requesting me to sit on a chair illuminated by another spotlight. To be frank, there was only a terrible premonition in my heart, but thinking that just standing there would bring me nowhere, I could only sit down obediently.

The chair felt exceptionally soft, while the back of the seat was particularly high as well. I wonder where they brought that from.

After that, as though it was waiting for me to sit down, a glass was passed to me from the darkness.

As soon as I took the glass, Raika-san immediately poured a drink into my glass.

”Nyan.”

After she poured in the drink, she made another cute pose. Is this…… special service?

A revealing costume, cute poses, and also a complete poker face, it just felt too mismatched.

”Erm…… Isn’t it about time for you to tell me what you’re playing at?”

Feeling thoroughly suspicious, I said to Sako-senpai.

When he heard my question, senpai waved his index finger in an exaggerated movement, making sounds of ‘tsk, tsk, tsk’ with his tongue.

”Such a question is really untactful, Segawa-kun. Don’t concern yourself about the small issues. Here, cheers. Don’t you like this the most?”

”What……?”

The glass obviously contained the sweet milked tea sold at the vending machines in the school canteen before lunch time, and really didn’t give me any desire to drink it, though indeed, it’s true that I often drink this.

”And food…… Nyan.”

After saying that, Raika-san took out what seemed to be her self-made bento.

Her bright eyes that looked like glass marbles looked at me unblinkingly.

I couldn’t refuse her unwavering gaze, so I picked up an onigiri from the bento container. Salmon was wrapped in it.

The pitiful combination of sweet milked coffee and salmon onigiri is so terrible that it’s hard to describe in words.

”There’s more.”

As Raika-san said, the large bento container was stuffed so full of onigiris and other appetizers that not a space could be seen in it.

”There’s a lot of drinks left as well.”

Sako-senpai approached, wearing an ominous smile.

Possibly because of his agitated screams just now, his face was full of perspiration.

”Ohhhh! That’s right! Oda-kun, help him ‘Ahhh~’!”

”Okay.”

Raika-san slowly took an onigiri, taking it to the side of my mouth.

”Ahhh~”

”Err…… Well……”

”Ahhh~”

”Uuuu…….”

It was really an irresistible request. Although I had some hesitations, I still allowed Raika-san to send the onigiris into my mouth. I should say, in such a situation, it’s completely impossible to refuse Raika-san’s ‘Ahhh~’. After all, the reason that I joined Roary and would come here in spite of my busy schedule is almost wholly because of her.

The one that I have not seen for a long time…… Well, it can still count that I haven’t seen her for a long time, although not ten days had passed, Raika-san is still very beautiful.

Even when one is in a situation that looks like one is being made fun of no matter how he looks at it, being fed hand-made bento by a person one loves can’t be resisted by men.

After swallowing a few onigiris and calming my emotions slightly, I spoke to the person that counts as one of the few reasons that I come to Roary, and was taking the chance to pass a drink to me:

”Oi, Nimura, what’s wrong with this?”

Being asked by me, the person whose appearance was good-looking like that of a gigolo that was passing a glass to me in the darkness, smiled wryly while shrugging as well.

”It’s just that they’re a bit concerned. For the matters that happened before this.”

”Before this……?”

The first friend that I made after entering college would be this person, Nimura Kouichi. He has good-looking features, and added to his considerate personality, awareness of cleanliness, being good at cooking, and having great eloquence, such a person is naturally popular among the girls. And he, himself, is very clear of his own advantage as well, happily enjoying college life in every sense.

”After the school festival, didn’t Sora-chan fall sick? Senpai and the others kept thinking that it’s because they forced her to join the school festival, and since you didn’t appear from that time as well, they was quite sad. Though Oda-senpai’s expression is still the same.”

I understand now, so it’s like this. I was very thankful for their thoughts and could understand their feelings as well, but it was just because of that, having them show their apology to me by doing all this made me feel bad as well.

”You guys don’t have anything to be sorry of. It’s my error for not taking notice of Sora-chan’s condition, and I’ve settled down because of my life as well, so I got careless……”

”But, I must still apologize. It would be better if we could have noticed.”

Raika-san’s brows were drooped a few centimeters more than usual, and she said in a low voice.

”Please don’t apologize. After all, Sora-chan’s body has completely recovered now.”

After hearing my words, Sako-senpai and Raika-san seemed to be relieved as well.

”T- That’s true! As I said! I actually don’t mind at all, it’s just that Oda-kun said that we should do this no matter what!”

”Kaichou lied. You were obviously worried.”

”N- Not at all! Nonono, please don’t say so! Oda-kun! You should say this somewhere I can’t hear it from……”

Sako-senpai said while moving his fat body, acting like he’s embarrassed.

…… Though it was rather disgusting, I’m certain that senpai is a good person.

”I’m very grateful for your thoughts, but instead of treating me like this, wouldn’t greeting Sora-chan directly be better? Speaking of which, isn’t it meaningless even if you apologize to me?”

”Well…… She hates me, after all……”

Sako-senpai said somewhat forlornly. It seems like he’s very clear about this.

”Not really, it hasn’t reached the extent of hating you…… To be precise, it’s probably a state when she only feels like avoiding you……”

”In any case, it just counts as dislike.”

My words of consolation were destroyed by Raika-san.

”Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! I’m just hateful anyway!”

Saying that a middle school girl is an oba-san the first time he met her, it’s quite understandable that he would be detested. Although I think that senpai brought it on himself, he seems to regret it quite a lot.

”Well, I only found out recently that Sora-chan is actually quite a shy girl, so putting in more time would probably be able to resolve the misunderstanding…… If there aren’t much accidents.”

”Really? Can I continue to live? She won’t say ‘Disgusting’, ‘Don’t want to breathe in the same air as you’, ‘Letting a person like you live is an original sin of mankind’ and the like?”

”……. Have you ever been said such a thing?”

I seemed to have touched a sore spot in senpai’s heart, but if I continue to look in, it seems like I would see something that I would rather not, so I stopped just there.

The gigolo, Nimura, chose that moment to scratch his head and say:

”To be honest, though it’s not as much as Sako-senpai’s, I’ve reflected on myself if I was too careless. As I think Sora-chan and the others have became more cheerful than when they were living at the small apartment I live at right now, so that was why I let them join as well, like cosplay, the school festival and the like…… I thought that letting them join the activities would make them more energetic.”

”Nimura, Sora-chan and the others said that they were quite happy, so don’t think too much about this.”

Everyone seemed to have been worried about the matters of our family.

On that scorching summer day, I lost my only sister, while the three sisters lost their parents.

That time, everything turned dark, and I even thought that there wouldn’t be a future after that as well—

I once had such thoughts. But the reason that I could support myself until this day would definitely be because of the presence of the three sisters and the people before me.

I hope that I can express my gratitude to them one day. It's just that I'm slightly embarrassed of expressing them right now.

"Yuuta……?"

"Ah! S- Sorry."

Seeing me smile unconsciously, Raika-san looked at me with her eyes widened.

On the next instant, she seemed to have thought of something, knocking her fist on her palm with an action as though she was acting out a play, standing up on the next instant. Raika-san searched for something at a corner of the dark clubroom, arousing my curiosity, and after some effort, senpai carried a large bag of items that one wouldn't be able to hold even with two hands to me.

"What's this?"

"A present for Yuuta."

"Present……?"

"That's right! I have good news for you! I originally wanted to let you know earlier, so that was why I asked you to look for me after the school festival, but you only showed up on today, so that's why it's so late!"

Sako-senpai regained his vigor the moment I gave a question, and he started to explain.

”Aren’t you surprised! Because of my efforts, Segawa-kun, you have a chance to regain the credits that you didn’t get last semester! It’s all thanks to me!”

Senpai praised his own contributions whole-heartedly, and he was totally correct.

Raika-san was holding the data for reports. As long as I complete them, I can regain the credits that I failed to get last semester. The life that underwent a large change after taking in the three sister caused me to fall in a panic, and I tripped because of that.

And just because of that, my credits were severely lacking, and the words ‘repeating the grade’ even flashed past my mind.

But even so, I still vowed to do my best getting back my credits, but I tripped yet again.

The results of my efforts to replenish my credits turned into the scenario when Sora-chan fell sick.

The regretful thing is, I can only use these reports to get credits from Liberal Studies and my other subjects, but I’m already thankful for this. If not for Sako-senpai’s help, I might never get such great conditions.

”Senpai…… Thank you very much!”

”Do your best, Yuuta.”

”I will! Raika-san!”

”Though there is quite a lot of it, we’ll help out as well.”

”Thank you…… Nimura, I’ll treat you to a meal.”

Because of my happiness, tears started to well up in my eyes.

”W- Wait a minute! The one who got these conditions for you was me! Me!”

”Ah, thanks, Sako-senpai.”

”That’s all!? Why are you so casual only to me! Fine! The others don’t matter, but you have to tell Miu-sama and Hina-sama that all of this is my contributions! If possible, you can tell Sora-kun by the way as well! If not, it’s very awkward for me to see them! Please, just help me out this once.”

So this is senpai’s motive? I won’t tell Miu-chan and the others then.

While being surrounded by the others, I smiled naturally.

Although the weather outside was getting colder and colder, warmth came by my side instead.

I arrived at my house at Ikebukuro, and inserted the key into the keyhole after taking it out from my pocket.

The door handle was cold as though it was frozen, and I was holding a heavy plastic bag on my arm as well. And of course, it contained the papers used for my reports.

Just thinking that I had to finish dealing with them before the winter break ended made me feel downcast.

Just at that moment, I noticed a pair of unfamiliar shoes at the entrance, arranged neatly with the toes pointing outside.

Although it was not particularly sharp, those were rather clean shoes that down-to-earth females would wear.

”Whoa…… Is it possible……”

I saw that the other shoes were neatly arranged as well, and even the folding umbrella that was carelessly thrown on the shoe rack was tidily kept as well.

There was only one fact shown by this situation. I steeled myself, and opened the door leading to the living room.

”Welcome back, Yuuta-san.”

Sitting on the sofa, Oba-san turned around to look at me faster than anyone else.

”W- Welcome, Oba-san.”

My voice couldn’t help but crack slightly. I still didn’t know how to handle the person, and after Nee-san disappeared, this Oba-san that can count as the only relative I can, is now my stern supervisor.

”Is there any reason you came here today? The inspection was done just last week……”

”Can I not come here without any business?”

”Uuu…… Not really…… I don’t mean that……”

I really didn’t know how to handle her.

But it seemed like I was not the only one who didn’t know how to cope. Sora-chan and Miu-chan who returned first were sitting on the sofa opposite to Oba-san’s with tense expressions as well.

Probably, the only person who was as usual was only Hina. Well, it’s indeed quite impossible for a three year old to be able to observe the others’ moods.

”From the looks, you did clean up the house properly.”

Oba-san spoke after looking around the living room.

”That’s right! All of us cleaned up together!”

Though Miu-chan answered with an exceptionally radiant smile, Oba-san did not show any particularly satisfied expression, but just sipped some tea.

”Remember to tidy up the entrance as well, as it is the place where guests would first see, after all.”

Miu-chan glared at me unhappily.

I can’t help things even if you glare at me…… But to be frank, I really have to ask Oba-san home as soon as possible today, as we have to choose a kimono for Hina after this.

”A- Actually! We have something to do after this!”

Just when I was cracking my head thinking of how to speak, Sora-chan resolved herself and spoke.

”Something to do?”

”Yes! We have to rent a kimono for Hina to wear on Shichi-Go-San! There isn’t much time left now, so……”

”Yes, yes, that’s how things are.”

The moment when Sora-chan finished, Miu-chan hurriedly added.

”If so, I came just at the right time.”

Oba-san ignored us after finishing her words, taking out a large wrapped bundle from a bag and placed it on the table.

”Excuse me, but…… What is this?”

”It’s a kimono, the one that Yuri-san wore before this.”

”Ehh……”

After Oba-san said that, the appearance of Nee-san smiling in a mature black kimono surfaced in my mind once more.

However, that kimono should have been disposed of by Nee-san already……

In front of the secretly tense me, Oba-san opened the wrapped bundle.

”Ahh……”

No.

This isn’t that kimono.

It was a red kimono completely different from the one in my memory.

Oba-san carefully opened the kimono before our eyes.

Although I can’t really differentiate between good and bad kimonos, I could still see from a glance that it was a high class item.

”This was what Yuri-san wore when she was three during her Shichi-Go-San, and it was given to my daughter after that for her to wear during Shichi-Go-San as well. After that, I carefully kept this until today.”

If so, this would be something from over twenty years ago. However, not only did the kimono not have any sign of decay, not even a wrinkle could be seen, so Oba-san probably kept it very carefully.

The kimono that Yuri Nee-san once wore. Just hearing that made me convoluted emotions well up in my heart, while Sora-chan and the others seemed to feel the same as well.

”This is Yuri-san’s…… Oba-san, did you come here just to bring the kimono here?”

”…… From the start, I have planned to bring it here when Hina-san is three. Actually, I wanted to hand this to you even earlier than this, but since you did not have the time or energy to deal with other matters before this, I continued to keep it.”

…… Indeed, we really didn’t have the time or energy to think of any other things up till now.

Facing the stern Oba-san who always thinks for us, I really feel grateful from the bottom of my heart.

Perhaps this small kimono that had been carefully kept is a symbol of Nee-san and Oba-san’s relationship.

But in the end, the kimono in my memory is already gone.

That made me somewhat sad.

As for Hina, she seemed rather excited as it was the first time she saw a real kimono.

”Uwaa— So pwetty—!”

”Hina, do you like it?”

”Yes! Like a stawberry!”

Although I heard the same thoughts before this as well, in any case, Hina seems to like the kimono quite a lot as well.

”Hina-san, come here. I will have to adjust the size for you.”

”’Kay~”

Hina quickly walked before Oba-san, sitting down on her lap after that.

”D- Don’t do that! Hina! You can’t do that!”

”Eh?”

It seemed like Hina was not clear of what she had done.

The more surprising thing was, Oba-san just gave a smile, a smile that radiated gentleness.

”Hehe, I can’t measure you like this, Here, stand up for a moment.”

”Okay!”

After that, Hina kept still, while Oba-san pressed the kimono on Hina’s back to measure.

As I recall, Oba-san has two children.

Although both of them already grew up and left home, I heard that Oba-san raised them single-handedly as well. Compared with me, she does everything much more orderly.

”It seems like not much modifications need to be made.”

After measuring, Oba-san immediately kept the kimono.

”Eh~ Are you taking it back?”

”I shall bring it again that day for the modification of the size. Besides, as long as it is worn, it is necessary to wash it.”

Facing Miu-chan’s somewhat sad response, Oba-san still said unwaveringly.

After finishing the matter, Oba-san immediately turned around to walk out.

”Err…… Actually, you don’t really need to go back so urgently…… That’s right, why don’t you stay for dinner?”

Instead of saying that those were polite words, it’s more accurate to say that I feel bad to let Oba-san go back just like that.

Even though Miu-chan and Sora-chan gazed at me quite sharply.

”No, that’s fine.”

After saying that, Oba-san immediately left unhesitatingly.

”Phew…… So tense!”

As soon as Oba-san left, Miu-chan immediately stretched her leg, heaving a huge sigh after that.

”Yeah, suddenly coming over here. It really gave me a huge fright.”

Similarly, Sora-chan collapsed on the sofa as well.

”When Hina ignored Oba-san, sitting directly on her lap, I was shocked as well.”

”I originally thought that she would get scolded, but thank goodness she just laughed. This isn’t good for my heart.”

”Uu~ Oba-tan went back?”

It seemed like only Hina felt regretful about Oba-san going home.

”However, the matter of the kimono is finally dealt with, Oji-san.”

”That’s right, even if the kimono is rented, the expenses are actually quite expensive.”

That was rather fortunate. If we rent a good quality kimono, the price would be quite considerable, while cheap ones would make one hesitate. Although there are kimonos that are in our budget, those are the same as the cheap rentals, not good enough for our cute Hina, while Sora-chan and my opinions were contrasting as well.

It was because Oba-san helped us out when we were forced to make difficult choices that her help felt timely.

As for Sora-chan, she is currently hugging Hina affectionately.

”That’s great, Hina. You can wear Mama’s kimono.”

Of course, Miu-chan and I understood the profound meaning contained in Sora-chan’s words.

”Will Mama come? What about Papa? Will they come on Shichi-Go-San?”

”Ah, err…… Well……”

Sora-chan looked at me helplessly.

”Hina, though it’s somewhat of a pity, Mama and Papa can’t come.”

”Uuu~……”

”B- But, people like Oba-tan, the Oji-sans of the Takanashi family, many people will come! And when we return, you can eat anything you want to!”

”…… ‘Kay!”

Hearing my words, Hina’s sorrowful expression before this brightened once more.

”Speaking of which, I was wondering from just now, what’s that plastic bag that Onii-chan is holding?”

”Ehh…… Oh! This is my homework. If I finish all this, I can replenish the credits that I didn’t get last semester. Though these are just from my Liberal Studies and other subjects. Ahh, you probably don’t understand, huh.”

Noticing the blank stares from Sora-chan and the others halfway through my words, I hastily stopped.

”In any case, if I finish these reports, I can completely escape from the crisis of repeating the grade.”

”Really?!”

”That’s great, Oji-san.”

Seeing them happy for this as though it concerned them, I couldn’t help but feel somewhat embarrassed. But having to finish so many reports is actually quite…… No, it’s an extremely hard work.

”Ah, yes, yes, I want to ask for your help……”

I spoke the matter that I cracked my head to think of a way to tell them on the way from the college to Ikebukuro.

”Ehhh! No!”

And after getting the predictable response…… I successfully consoled Sora-chan using a considerable amount of time as the price.

After that, on the few days before Shichi-Go-San, we started to get busy while feeling excited.

So that I would have the whole day free, I adjusted my working schedule, so I would have to go home later than usual for a few days straight. In the past, I would worry that this would burden Sora-chan and Miu-chan these times, however……. It’s different recently.

Because now, I have reliable companions.

I arrived at the Kitahara residence opposite to our house while being slightly nervous, and the voice of ‘May I ask who this is?’ could be heard right after I pressed the doorbell.

”I’m from the Takanashis opposite to this, and I’m here to fetch Hin……”

Before I even finished, the door already opened.

”Welcome. About Hina-chan, she’s playing with Shiori. Why don’t you come in first?”

The friendly mother of the Kitahara family greeted me at the entrance, while her smile did not allow me to have any opinions about that, and that made me decide to stop at the Kitahara residence for a moment without further ado.

As soon as I stepped into the house, I could hear Hina’s happy voice from the living room.

”You already helped us to fetch Hina from the kindergarten, and we have to give you trouble by asking you to take care of her as well. So sorry for that.”

The mother just smiled after seeing me lower my head.

”You don’t need to worry so much. No matter it’s me or Shiori, we like taking care of Hina-chan very much. I shall make some tea, and bring some choux à la crème as well. Please, come in, come in.”

”Oi-tan, you’re back!”

Just at that moment, Hina ran towards me, hugging me tightly after almost completely ramming into me.

”Hina-chan wants choux à la crème as well, right?”

”Chou la cream is good!”

Before being able to hug Hina back, she slipped away from my side, running over to Shiori-chan’s mother.

Though, seeing Hina being so friendly with other people made me feel grateful……. Well, that feeling really is quite complicated.

”That’s great. Actually, we make them ourselves. I hope you’ll like it.”

”Oba-chan’s desserts are weally weally good!”

No, now I can’t say that I want to go back directly anymore. Mrs. Kitahara quickly served red tea and a tray with desserts on. The tray contained beautiful choux à la crème that really didn’t seem like they were home-made, and was really scrumptious as well! The taste of the cream was truly heavenly, while the texture of the thin, crispy crust was just as wonderful.

However, that would be another problem. The problem would be the scene before me.

”So~ tasty! Shiori Nee-tan, you have some as well. Ahhh~”

”Hehe! Thank you, Hina-chan. Let me do that as well. Hina-chan, ahhh~”

Why! Hina wasn’t sitting on my lap, but on Shiori-chan’s. And the two of them were feeding dessert to each other!?

”Hina, come sit on Oi-tan’s lap……”

”Shiori Nee-tan smells nice~”

Ignoring my words, Hina continued to rub her face on Shiori-chan’s chest.

”I helped mother to make the choux à la crème just now, after all. But Hina-chan helped as well, so…… Mnn~ You smell nice.”

Well, seeing them so intimate…… Oi-tan feels so lonely.

”Err…… Hina, you’ll have to thank Shiori-chan for playing with you today, and also…… It’s about time……”

”Mnn! Listen, Hina played with Shiori Nee-tan’s doll today!”

”That’s my toy when I was little, so it’s fine even if Hina wants to bring it home.”

”Hina already has bunny at home. It’s fine as long as Hina can play with Shiori Nee-tan.”

”Okay, you can come here whenever you want! Seriously, why is Hina so cute!”

”Shiori Nee-tan is cute as well!”

The two embraced tightly, completely ignoring my presence.

Erm…… I feel so sad, Hina.

Hina is indeed an invincible three year old girl who is so cute that it’s reasonable her to be loved by the whole world, but that would be another matter. I’m wishing that the ones at the center of Hina’s world would be Sora-chan, Miu-chan and I.

Of course, Shiori-chan and the Kitahara family really are good neighbors, and we kept being taken care of by them…… But, however…….! Even so……!

I’m wishing that Hina doesn’t look for Shiori-chan, but would say that ‘Hina wants to sit on Oi-tan’s lap’!

Ah~! Is this what they call envy!

”Oi-tan……”

Ohhh, Hina, you understood? So indeed, you’ll have to choose your own family in the end, right! Come, sit on Oi-tan’s lap!

”Your face…… is stwange.”

The three year old unforgivingly did a tsukkomi on I, who was looking at them with mixed feelings.

Mrs. Kitahara was smiling meaningfully at a side, while Shiori-chan just stared at me with the expression of wanting to shy away.

”It’s about time for them to go home now, Shiori.”

As though she saw through my thoughts, Mrs. Kitahara’s warm smile made me feel quite embarrassed.

”…… About them…… The oji-san can go home any time he likes.”

Shiori-chan’s not too happy voice was exceptionally piercing in my ears.

”Remember to bring back the choux à la crème as a present. I hope for Sora-chan and the others to eat them as well.”

”Tell Sora-chan and Miu-chan by the way that they can come over to play any time they like.”

What’s this? The preferential treatment that Shiori-chan and her mother is showing……

Seems like they’re saying that I don’t need to come……. Is that just my imagination?

When I took the choux à la crème that I was supposed to take home and was about to return with Hina, Hina suddenly spoke:

”Oi-tan, Shiori Nee-tan says that she wants to see the Shichi-Go-San as well! Let her see Hina wearing a kimono as well!”

I turned around and saw Shiori-chan waving to Hina with a broad smile.

”I’ll definitely go, so remember to tell your sisters as well.”

Completely ignoring my wishes, Shiori-chan went back into her house just like that.

…… I just feel as though there's still some distance between she and I, and she is just distancing herself from me. Why is that, I wonder.

Let's not bother about these for the moment.

In any case, I start to feel like the Shichi-Go-San this time would be quite lively.

Just like that, the sunny day of Shichi-Go-san arrived.

"Shi~chi-Go-San ♪ Shi~chi-Go-San ♪ Whee~ Turn around and it's Shi~chi-Go-San ♪"

A pure, bright singing voice resounded in the solemn shrine with a paved rock ground.

The person singing would be our family's diva.

And of course, the lyrics and melody were original, full of a sense unique to toddlers, and added to the lyrics with unclear lyrics and the special husky singing voice, it caused the frequency of playback to increase drastically in one's mind.

This might be called as natural talent.

Would Hina be an idol or a composer in the future?

Hina, who walked between Raika-san and I, seemed to be quite cheerful, but we went through quite some trouble before that as well. At first, though Hina was somewhat happy when she wore the grand clothes, after wearing the unfamiliar kimono and wooden clogs in excitement for some time, she started to feel tired, throwing a tantrum halfway. Asking a three year old

toddler to do something unfamiliar for a long time is actually unexpectedly hard.

Plus, since all of the three year olds in the whole country would pray during Shichi-Go-San, there would be quite a long waiting time as well.

After trying hard to console Hina and bringing her to the shrine, her mood finally improved.

Speaking of which, it was all thanks to Raika-san, who met up with us earlier.

The matter that I asked of Sora-chan and the others was actually to allow the members of Roary to join 'Hina's Shichi-Go-San' as well, but allowing Raika-san to come over first was really a wise decision. As Hina was throwing her tantrum, Raika-san spoke something by Hina's ears, causing her to brighten all of a sudden.

"Oi-tan, can I get Chiroro Ame after this?"

"Chiroro…… What's what?"

"Erm, well, Raika-chan said, if Hina does her best during Shichi-Go-San, Hina can get Chiroro Ame!"

"Perhaps you're talking about Chitose Ame?"

"Yes! That's it! She said that it's tha~t big, and it's really tasty too!"

It seems like Raika-san used the tactic of food to console her.

"Hina, that's not Chiroro Ame, but Chitose Ame. Why don't you say it again?"

"Chisese Ame?"

"Nono, Chi- To- Se, A- Me"

”Hahahaha! Oi-tan is stwange!”

And then I was treated as a crackpot.

”Raika-san, thank you. You really helped out a lot by coming.”

”It’s fine, and I wanted to come over myself.”

It felt like Raika-san was somewhat distracted. It seemed like she was preoccupied looking at Hina.

”Hina is thirsty~”

”What! …… Uuu…… Please be patient for a moment more, I’ll buy fruit juice for you after this.”

”Eh~ Oi-tan is a cheapsate~”

”I brought some mixed fruit juice.”

Raika-san took out a water bottle from the bag on her shoulder.

”Hina-chan, do you like mixed fruit juice?”

”Yes! Mixed foot juice!”

”W- Wait a minute! She’ll feel like going to the restroom if she drinks it now!”

”Hina, are you fine with that?”

”Yes, no problem.”

Wait a sec, that’s completely unbased…… In the end, Hina drank a whole two cups of Raika-san’s homemade mixed fruit juice. To be frank, I was somewhat envious of Hina.

”Hah~ That was tasty. Raika-chan, not bad!”

”Hina…… Where did you learn that from……”

Just like that, we walked forwards along the road to the shrine while holding each other’s hands.

Having Hina hold our hands in the middle, we might look like a family to the people passing by.

”S- Seriously.”

My expression couldn’t help but soften.

Hina’s look after dressing up is undoubtedly great, but Raika-san, who put on make up carefully today, was giving off a presence that rivals models and artistes. I really wish to thank the person who invented the event called Shichi-Go-San.

”What’s with your foolish smile! Onii-chan! Aren’t you embarrassed!”

”Uwagh!?”

My bottom was suddenly pinched, causing me to almost jump in pain.

”S- Sora-chan……”

For some reason, it was Sora-chan’s turn to be unhappy.

”I say……. That hurts.”

”Hmph! Isn’t that obvious? I wanted you to feel pain.”

Please don’t do that anymore. Besides, why do I have to be pinched!?

”Oji-san is quite good at committing sins~ You’re really lacking in the delicacy department.”

”That’s right, Segawa-chan is really too honest that way. Ah, natural airheads are quite scary~”

”Those two over there! I heard that! Just tell me if you know the reason for that!”

Nimura, whose appearance was even more formal than usual, and Miu-chan, whose appearance matches that of an idol, were speaking as they like before us. We are really quite a sharp group…… Except for me.

”That’s right, speaking of which, isn’t there a person missing?”

Yes, that would be the person who said ‘Leave the photographing to me’ not long before.

The person looked forward to this day more than anyone else, and was abnormally excited about it, but not even a shadow of him could be seen at the moment. When I asked about that, Miu-chan pointed to a direction and said:

”If you’re looking for the president, he’s over there.”

”Ehh……”

When I had a closer look, I did notice a rather familiar silhouette behind the supporting pillars of the shrine.

”What’s he up to……?”

”He said *’To take the most natural pictures, one must keep a distance with the photographed target.’*.”

As Miu-chan said, Sako-senpai was holding a camera that looked like a thick bamboo shoot because of the huge telephoto lens, and was repeatedly pressing the shutter.

After Miu-chan waved at senpai, it seemed like the sounds of the shutter became even more vigorous.

”If possible, I’m hoping that he can photograph the main character today instead……”

”I mentioned that to him, but I can’t guarantee that he would take photos seriously.”

I saw Sako-senpai agitatedly gesturing at me from afar, probably asking me to stand further apart.

”…… It seems like it’s better not to be too expectant of him.”

”Ahaha, that seems to be the case. We will take a separate commemorative photo after this as well, so it’ll probably be fine.”

Miu-chan added with a small laugh.

”Seriously! He’s so embarrassing. Let’s pretend we don’t know him!”

Sora-chan walked forward with large steps, while I hurriedly chased her as well. After going through the Torii, walking through the shrine administrative office, a vast plaza with a rock-paved floor came into our view, while the spectacular building over there would be the **kagura-den**

> Kagura-den = A building dedicated to Noh or the sacred kagura dance.

After undergoing a ritual and taking commemorative photos over here, the whole process would end.

After that, we planned to go home for a change of clothes, going out together for a meal after that.

The regretful thing is, that moment would signify the end of Hina’s magnificent dressing up.

After all, I don’t have the courage to bring a three year old toddler wearing a kimono out.

Before the kagura-den, I saw that Oba-san and the Oji-san from the Takanashi family waiting there.

”We’ve waited for you for a long time. We have already finished the procedures for this.”

After saying that, Oba-san handed what seemed to be a number tag to me.

It seemed like Oba-san came over to our house at Ikebukoro to help Hina dress up, meeting up with Oji-san at the shrine to handle the procedures after that. Not only was she quick, Oba-san’s efficiency is really quite admirable.

”Ohhhh! Hina-chan! You look reeeeeeeally good in that!”

As for the Oji-san of the Takanashi family, he started to take photos non-stop all of a sudden, holding an expensive-looking single lens camera that rivals that of Sako-senpai’s equipment, taking photos of Hina from various angles.

”Oji-sama from the Takanashis, good afternoon.”

”Miu-chan became more dazzling as well! Did you grow taller again!?”

”My~ Didn’t we meet just last month?”

”Oh, that’s right, Wahahahahaha!”

How to say this…… This feeling of my whole body going weak.

”Sigh…… I really don’t dare to imagine what will happen next.”

It seemed like Sora-chan had the same thoughts as mine, with her shoulders heavily slumped.

”Sora-chan! Look over here! Come! Smile, smile!”

”A- Ahahaha……”

Sigh! If this goes on, it might be some time before we could take part in the ceremony.

”The ceremony seems to be starting soon, so let’s wait inside.”

While the dull waiting time passed, we quickly entered the kagura-den after Oba-san chivvied us inside. Since basically, the only ones who can enter are relatives, I asked Raika-san and the others to wait outside first.

An atmosphere even more solemn than the outside filled the kagura-den.

Many families that were lining up to wait for the ceremony were gathered there as well.

Although everyone were wearing vibrant kimonos, it’s impossible that there would be a child cuter or more good looking than Hina in a kimono. Is this what they call the mindset of parents favoring their own children?

”Uuu~”

Just at that moment, I noticed Hina moving around, looking as though she wasn’t well.

”What is it, Hina?”

”Uuu~……”

”Is your sash uncomfortable? Do you need us to loosen it?”

Sora-chan looked at her sister in worry as well.

”…… Pee.”

”Ehh……”

”What……”

The word that came from Hina's mouth caused us to freeze momentarily.

"Hina wants to pee~"

"W- Wait a minute, at this time!?"

"Hina! Hold it in a bit loner!"

"No~ Can't~"

Ignoring our panicked responses, Hina started to stamp the floor.

"Pee~ Pee~"

In the solemn kagura-den, the sound of 'Pee' resounded.

The parents nearby were all holding in laughter.

"Ah~ Seriously! That's why I told you not to drink the fruit juice!"

"Oi-tan, didn't you pwomise not to say that~"

"Where on earth did you learn these words from!?"

"I- In any case, shouldn't we bring Hina to a restroom first?"

"But isn't it almost our turn now!?"

"Speaking of which, how does one go to the restroom in a kimono!?"

"What are you fussing about?"

We heard a steady voice completely unaffected by panic. Oba-san had returned after finishing the procedures.

"A- Actually……"

After I explained the reason, Oba-san was not especially hassled, but just brought Hina to the restroom after saying *'I'll take her there*'.

Just like that, Oba-san brought Hina, who looked quite refreshed, back without even five minutes passing.

”Hah~ That’s better~”

On the instant that I heard Hina say that, I felt the tension in my whole body loosen.

”Yuuta-san.”

”Y- Yes!”

But when I heard Oba-san call my name as soon as she spoke, I unconsciously straightened my body immediately.

”You are her guardian. Before panicking, you should think of what you should do.”

”Yes…… I’m sorry.”

I was scolded.”

”Oi-tan! Don’t mind!”

”You……”

Hina’s consolation made me feel even more discouraged.

The ceremony of Shichi-Go-San was simpler than I thought.

The priest prayed before the children that gathered, conducting a simple praying ritual one by one after that. I was originally worried that Hina wouldn’t stay still when then ceremony was progressing, but thank goodness she was unexpectedly obedient during the process.

It’s just that the prayers of the priest seemed to be funny to Hina, as she almost laughed for quite a few times, making Sora-chan and I extremely nervous.

In such a situation, we entered the stage most important for a three year old’s Shichi-Go-San— the hair cutting ritual.

That means, the baby hair that is grown on a child from birth are to be cut, starting to let the hair grow long from this day onwards, making a motion of cutting the hair with scissors. This ritual has to be done by an elder among the relatives.

Thus, this part was handled by Shingo Nii-san’s elder brother, Nobuyoshi-san.

On the instant Nobuyoshi-san, who seemed so tense that his whole body was rigid, touched Hina’s hair, he started to cry all of a sudden.

”Hina-chan…… is just too cute. You will definitely find happiness. Shingo….. Why did you…… Uuuu……”

I understand the emotions welling up in his heart very well. While Hina was looking quite puzzled, we, who motioned Hina not to move, had some tears in our eyes as well.

Just like that, the ceremony successfully ended, and what followed was the commemorative photo.

The person waiting for us outside the shrine was Shiori-chan, who seemed to have arrived late, and also…… Sako-senpai.

”Halt! You hentai! Hand over the dataaaaaaaa!”

With a huge camera on his hands, Sako-senpai was being chased by Shiori-chan.

On the other hand, Nimura and Raika-san, who didn't know Shiori-chan, could only smile wryly at a side while being flustered.

"Ah! Sora-chan! This guy is secretly taking photos! Stalker! I noticed him taking photos of you all secretly! Help me catch him!"

"W- Wait! Wait for a moment! This is a misunderstanding! I am a photographer hired just to take perfect photos of the dressed up Hina-sama! Sora-kun, hurry up and clear things up for me!"

"…… Sora-chan, is it possible that…… You know this person?"

"No, I don't know him."

Sora-chan said unhesitatingly.

"H- How can this be! Sora-kun! I will not call you an oba-san anymore! Please forgive me!"

There, only the wailing Sako-senpai, Nimura and I who were hugging our heads, and the wide-eyed Oba-san with her mouth agape were present.

It was only after that that we took a commemorative photo outside the shrine.

"I- I'll pass!"

"Don't say that, let's take it together. You're already here anyway."

I spoke to invite Shiori-chan, who planned to refuse, to join us. Of course, Nimura and Raika-san were not excluded as well.

After all, if not for everyone's help, we can't even undergo the Shichi-Go-San today as we wished to.

Apart from Nobuyoshi-san, who didn't wish for his crying face to be filmed no matter what, and Sako-senpai, who was in charge of photographing, we gave our blessings for Hina's Shichi-Go-San in the photo with a smile.

The smile must have been felt by Nee-san and the others somewhere in heaven. It's unmistakable.

What should I say next. It was really a hectic week—

Those were my thoughts when we sighed after finally reaching home.

Thinking that such a thing would have to be done once more really made me somewhat discouraged.

That made the thought that it's fortunate that Sora-chan and Miu-chan had already completed their Shichi-Go-San surface in my mind.

And the hill of unfinished reports before me was another problematic issue as well, so—

"Is Oi-tan tired?"

Hina, who was sitting on my lap, asked while looking upwards at my face.

That moment, Hina had just took her bath, and was blowing her hair dry at the living room.

"Hmm? Oh, just a little. What about Hina? Are you tired?"

"The Chirose Ame is tasty."

"It's Chitose Ame. Oh well, as long as you like it…… Okay, your hair's dry now."

"Mnn!"

Hina quickly dashed into the kitchen.

”Hey! Hina! Remember to close it properly after opening it!”

Sora-chan, who just walked down from the second floor, reminded Hina, who was taking out milk from the fridge.

”Onii-chan, I found it.”

”Mnn, thank you.”

I took a pile of considerably thick albums from Sora-chan’s hands.

Some rather exquisite decorative words were printed on the cover, which would be ‘Memories of the Takanashi Family’.

As we asked Sako-senpai to print the photos that he took today, we planned to keep them immediately in the album. The said album was full of photos of the Takanashis.

Of course, Shingo Nii-san as Sora-chan and the others’ father was in it as well, and Nee-san was present as well.

The Nee-san in the photo wore an expression that was slightly different from what I was familiar with.

That would probably be her look as a ‘mother’.

”Yuri-san once said that the three of us must be taken together when photos are taken.”

Sora-chan looked at the photo that seemed to be taken at a playground, with a nostalgic on her face.

”Ah! It’s Mama! Let Hina see, let Hina see!”

”No hurry. Here, sit here, look at this with Onee-chan.”

And I picked up another album, flipping through it as well.

In there, I saw photos of Sora-chan and Miu-chan who were much younger than they are now.

Miu-chan, who looked only a few years older than Hina right now, stuck close to Sora-chan in each and every photo.

On the other hand, the photos of the young Sora-chan was taken with a beautiful woman that seemed to be her birth mother.

”Ah! Onii-chan, look, look. It’s the photo of my Shichi-Go-San!”

That was probably taken when Sora-chan was three. The Sora-chan in the photo wore clothes similar to what Hina was wearing today, while the bright smile in the photo overlapped with Hina in my memories, while the woman at a side wore a smile like that of a holy mother.

Actually, I wasn’t sure about the matters of Sora-chan and Miu-chan’s mothers. Although I heard that Sora-chan’s mother already passed away, I never asked of Sora-chan’s age when that happened.

Just because of that, I chose to speak a truth seen before my eyes.

”Uuu~……. Ohh! You’re really cute! Almost comparable to Hina.”

”R- Really?”

”Mnn, you look really good in a kimono.”

”Ehehe…… Hina~ Onii-chan said that I’m as cute as Hina!”

”Waa~!”

Sora-chan hugged her sister from behind, shaking her here and there in excitement.

I looked at the happy girls, and my gaze was suddenly attracted by a photo when I swept through the page.

I looked at the photo in shock. In the photo, there were Sora-chan, Nii-san beside her and another female, holding the baby Miu-chan that seemed to have been just given birth to.

”This is……”

Judging from her appearance, that person should be slightly older than Nee-san.

She has features rarely seen on a Japanese, long, blonde hair— a woman who looks extremely similar to Miu-chan in every aspect.

—So this person is Miu-chan’s mother……

She indeed possesses features striking enough to give birth to a beautiful maiden like Miu-chan, and I admired Nii-san in my heart for being able to find such a beauty. Speaking of which, because of the blonde hair, I guessed from the start that Miu-chan’s mother is probably not Japanese, and I am certain of such a thing only at this moment.

Speaking of which, even if Nee-san doesn’t have the striking features of this person, she is still an established beauty, while Sora-chan’s mother is quite beautiful as well. In any case, she is still the mother of a young beauty, so that’s quite reasonable.

—Nii-san, you’re really good at choosing!

When I flipped through the album while thinking of all that, I noticed a strange fact all of a sudden. To reaffirm it, I looked through the whole album once again, and that moment……

”Onee-chan, I’m finished with the bathroom…… Eh? What’s everyone doing here?”

Miu-chan, who just finished with her bath, arrived at the living room with her hair tied up.

”We’re looking through photos. Miu, why don’t you come over and look as well.”

”Uuu~……. I’ll pass. I’m going to bed.”

Miu-chan took out a bottle of mineral water from the fridge, returning to her room after that.

Is it because of fatigue? It felt like Miu-chan wasn’t really well.

”Is there anything wrong……?”

Sora-chan looked at me in puzzlement, while my eyes continued to tail Miu-chan’s silhouette……

”Onii-chan?”

I only came to my senses after Sora-chan’s call, and hurriedly shifted my gaze.

”…… Errr~ I think it’s about time for me to bathe and sleep as well.”

”That’s right, you’ll start to get busy from tomorrow, right? And you have so many reports to deal with as well.”

”Uuu…… Although things are indeed so…… Please don’t remind me of annoying matters.”

I left the living room with my shoulders slumped.

The mystifying matter that I perceived was……

In any corner of the album, photos of Miu-chan’s Shichi-Go-San when she was three couldn’t be found.

Chapter 2 – Hina's Bento

In the three-tsubo room that was originally Shingo Nii-san's, the sounds of typing on a keyboard resounded.

As there are always new innovations in the computer industry, the notebook computer that Nee-san gave me as a present for entering college gave off a slightly outdated sense, but its performance when handling documents is still fine.

Although I had been typing essays for six hours straight, the computer still functioned rather smoothly.

The only problem would be I, as the user, don't even have a year's experience of using computers.

"Ahh~…… My arm is starting to ache……"

Added with the fact that I had to look at the monitor and the keyboard in turn when I am typing, my eye started to hurt as well. Since I still couldn't type without looking at the keyboard, that couldn't be helped, but after considering the future, it felt like it would be better to learn it quicker.

"Perhaps it's harder to type on because it's a laptop? Buying a desktop computer would solve everything."

"We don't have the money to waste."

"Well, why don't you borrow the computer of Sora-chan and the others' dad? That seemed to be quite fine."

"Uuu~ The computer seems to have a strong protection, so it's impossible to use it without the password. And I won't be able to handle it if there's any dangerous data in it as well, so I just left it there."

”Ahh~ That’s true, since there would probably be data about his work, after all.”

I didn’t stop the movements of my hands while chatting, but the main reason would be because my typing speed is far slower than my thinking speed.

”However, asking someone to hand in a report on paper is quite strange judging from the current standards.”

Nimura said while checking if there were any typos or mistakes in my finished reports.

”I don’t have any choice as well. And besides, the professor in charge is quite old as well, so I’m already thankful that he didn’t force me to write it out.”

”Writing it out would be troublesome…… Okay, these are all done.”

”Ohh, thank you!”

Thus, I finished another report. With my efforts of working hard without rest for three days, the progress rate that dropped because of the preparations for Shichi-Go-San and other trivial matters seems to be saved.

As for how many is left……. I don’t want to count them right now.

In any case, if I can’t finish the large stack of documents by my feet before the end of the winter break, I really won’t be able to face Sako-senpai and the others who specially convinced the professors for me.

”Well then, what are you going to do next, Segawa-chan? Why don’t you take a break for a moment?”

”That’s fine, since such a long time passed, I’m starting to get hungry……”

Just at that moment, sounds of knocking on the door rang.

”Onii-chan……?”

A small lock of hair that looked like an antenna poked in from the slit of the door. Sora-chan, who was in her school uniform, was looking inside in slight caution.

”Welcome home, Sora-chan. Did you go for club activities today as well?”

”Mnn, yeah……”

Recently, Sora-chan keeps coming home rather late, and although I, as her guardian, am quite worried for her, since it was because of her club, I wish to give Sora-chan some freedom as well.

”You came back just at the right time, since I was just done, and was planning to make dinner. It should be my turn today, right? Although I haven’t bought any ingredients……”

”Ah, you don’t need to trouble yourself then. I’ll make it myself.”

”It’s fine, fine. Aren’t you late after going for club activities? Besides, Nimura is here as well, so let’s just eat some ready-made food……”

”No! That would be a waste!”

”Err, if it’s just for today……”

No matter what I said, Sora-chan insisted to make dinner herself.

If so, the shift system that we decided on would have lost its meaning.

Before this, Sora-chan left her club just to take care of the family, and even fell sick because of overexertion.

I don’t wish for things to turn out like that again, and besides, Sora-chan already returned to the Choir Club that she was in, while I secretly vowed

to myself not to make the girls feel limited no matter it's about their clubs or them having fun.

Speaking of which, I stayed together with them just because of worry in the first place, so if this continues, it's totally opposite to what I have planned.

"Onii-chan, you probably didn't sleep too much because of your reports, right? Didn't you make breakfast this morning as well? You really don't need to push yourself so hard."

Just like that, I made people worry for me instead. I'm so incompetent.

If so, that rude middle schooler…… Err, is he called Maeshima or Maeda again? Wouldn't the things that he scolded me with come true?

At these times, I, as a guardian, should show a more reliable side instead.

"I'm on duty today, so that's quite reasonable. And considering the fact that the ingredients might be all used up, going on duty every two days should be……"

"Seriously, that's not the main point! I'm telling you to let me make dinner since you're busy!"

"But that won't do!"

"Why not!"

"Just because!"

"I say……. I don't want to interrupt when you're so engrossed in this, but…… Why don't you just let me make it?"

Just when we were strained to the limit, Nimura interrupted.

"B- But, you're a guest after al, Nimura……"

”It’s fine, fine, since I like cooking as well. The kitchen here is quite large, so I’ve always wanted to try cooking here!”

So sorry, Nimura. Speaking of which, this man does indeed have professional level cooking skills. Although Sora-chan still seemed to be somewhat dissatisfied, after seeing Nimura’s eager expression, she could only yield unwillingly.

”Well then, I’ll wash the clothes!”

After Sora-chan said that while turning around, Miu-chan coincidentally passed by the door.

”Onee-chan, so you’re back.”

”Ahh……”

Miu-chan was holding the washing basket in her hands.

”T- Then…… I’ll help bathe Hina!”

”Hina is at Shiori-san’s place.”

”Uuu……”

Sora-chan seemed rather annoyed. However, she was not the only person who was surprised by Miu-chan’s statement.

”Wait a minute, why didn’t anyone mention this to me?”

”Didn’t I say that Shiori-san would fetch Hina over to play?”

”Not at all!”

”Well, apart from Hina, Katsuya-kun is over there as well……”

”What!?”

It was the first time I heard of it. I never thought that such a thing would happen.

After Shiori-chan's mother is a very friendly person, as she helped take care of Hina time after time after finding out about our circumstances. Plus, she once worked as a kindergarten teacher, so she's an expert in taking care of toddlers.

The reason that I rest assured with Hina in her hands was because I heard that they usually help neighbors in the district take care of children as well.

However, if I knew that from the start, I might not have handed Hina to them so easily. In truth, the troublemaker, Katsuya-kun, that is in the same kindergarten as Hina was usually taken care of by the Kitahara family as well.

Possibly because Hina has a playmate, she got used to the Kitahara family immediately, but when I think of the kid called Katsuya, just like the fellow called Takeshi-kun who was suspected to have taken away Hina's first kiss in the kindergarten at Hachiouji, would hug our Hina as he likes as well, it really tests my self-restraint.

Needless to say, I know that my behavior is like that of a silly father.

Even though asking other people to help take care of Hina is an unavoidable situation, as long as I exist in this family, there is no need for our Hina to stay together with Katsuya-kun. Thinking of that, I forcefully stood up from the chair.

"I shall fetch Hina back immediately!"

"Segawa-chan, what about the reports!"

"Who cares!"

Miu-chan, who saw that I was about to rush to the Kitahara residence opposite to our house, immediately clutched at me tightly.

”How can I hand Hina to other men!”

”Oji-san, it’s problematic when you phrase it like that! An extreme lack in the delicacy department!”

”There is no need for more talk! Let go of me, Miu-chan! As a guardian, to allow Hina to grow up healthily, even if I have to choose a more difficult road, I will still—“

”Stop it!”

Ka-thwack! I was hit by Miu-chan with a slipper.

”…… Ah!? Just now, what did I……”

”Thank goodness Oji-san returned to normal. Okay, just continue working at your reports, Oji-san!”

”Uu, uuu…….”

As Miu-chan already said that with a smile on her face, I could only sit before the computer once again.

”Seriously, Onee-chan, you should change your uniform first as well. After all, there’s still some time before dinner starts.”

”Mnn…… That’s true……”

Sora-chan returned to her room in slight despair.

On the other hand, Miu-chan watched Sora-chan’s leaving silhouette with a wry smile.

Takanashi Sora is not good at waking up early.

Whenever she wakes up, her mind would be completely blank, unable to think, while her limbs would be so heavy that it was as though blocks of lead were tied to them. This season would be especially tough, as one would be exposed to extreme coldness just by leaving the blankets one step.

Being assaulted by a coldness that makes one freeze involuntarily, Sora's brain that was unfocused because of the bad blood circulation would clearly state its opinions instead: *'It's dangerous over here, hurry up and return to warmer places'*.

However, Sora still forced herself to walk to the sink with firm resolve. Although over thirty minutes are required for the alarm clock to ring until this stage, to Sora, the time has already been drastically shortened.

By the way, the one in charge of breakfast that day would be Yuuta. It was the second day for Yuuta to be on duty.

But judging from the situation of the day before, Yuuta should have worked hard at his reports until late night, so he probably didn't have the time to make breakfast that morning. Which means, nobody was making breakfast that day, or cereal and milk will be served.

"Okay……!"

Sora washed her face with cold water, forcibly waking her brain, cheering her reflection in the mirror on. *I'll do my best, as I'm the eldest sister in this family!*

"Ah, Sora-chan, good morning."

However, the kitchen was occupied by an unexpected person.

"Sorry, please allow me to borrow the kitchen."

Even though putting an apron with pictures of flowers over an attire of a plain colored shirt and jeans would seem uncoordinated, it did not look strange on him, most probably because of his excellent conditions.

Apart from that, there was a pair of glasses that he does not usually wear on his face.

Deliberately adding a foreign object on good looking features can emphasize its beauty instead—

The only friend that knows of Sora's otaku interests once told that to her.

Disregarding the theories for the moment, in any case, Sora likes differences in one's image and also glasses, but adding a coat and a tie would be better. The suit must not be one like that of a gigolo, but the commercial suits that salarymen would wear.

After working hard at work, taking off the blazer with perspiration on the whole body, loosening the tie with one hand—

Actions like this is what Sora likes the most.

Thus, Sora hopes very much that a certain person would graduate from college as soon as possible, entering the society to work.

If possible, jobs in the business industry would be the best. Going here and there every day to do business, and when he returns home in exhaustion, she can welcome him home at the entrance. Sora couldn't refrain a smile from reaching her face just by imagining the instant of that scene.

…… Strayed too far from the topic.

Sora forcefully shook her head, as though she was ridding the delusions in her mind.

"Nimura-san, didn't you go back yesterday?"

”Mnn, since I really couldn’t make it to the last train. Ah, if you’re looking for your uncle, he’s still sleeping. To be precise, he has just finished for the moment, so he’s taking a nap. Although he said that he wanted to *’Finish making breakfast before sleeping’*, I think it’s better not to wake him. I already turned off his alarm clock.”

Nimura said while carefully wrapping up the omurice. After a closer look, it could be seen that cutlery reflecting the numbers of people were already neatly arranged on the dining table, and what’s left was the food.

”So that’s why I’m volunteering to prepare breakfast in his stead.”

”I’ll help!”

”No need, no need, it’s almost completely done.”

”But……”

Since I didn’t do anything yesterday, I must do better today……! Sora originally had the thought, and was full of vigor because of that, but her hopes were already dashed from the start.

”Good morning~……. Eh? It’s Nimura-san.”

Sora’s two sisters arrived at the living room while rubbing their sleepy eyes.

”Good morning, Miu-chan. Breakfast will be ready in a moment.”

”That’s great, we can eat Nimura-san’s cooking again.”

”I made toast for Miu-chan and Sora-chan, while Hina-chan can have pancakes.”

”Pancakes! Hina’s bakefast is pancake!?”

”That’s right. Hina-chan, do you like pancakes?”

”Yes!”

”That’s great. Oh yeah, do you have maple syrup over here?”

”Ah, maple syrup is kept in that wardrobe……”

Seeing her sisters’ excited looks, Sora looked at them coldly.

She did not have any complaints for Nimura, and to be honest, she wanted to eat the breakfast that he made as well.

But what about the inexplicable emotions that she had? Sora did not know how to explain her sense of annoyance. Thus, she snatched the job of taking out the trash after quickly finishing breakfast, as though she wanted to escape from such a torture.

Sora walked to the garbage collection station only one minute’s walking distance away, and was about to walk back after placing the garbage bag there when she saw Shiori, who was taking out the trash as well, and energetically greeted the big sister neighbor who always took care of them.

”Good morning, Shiori-san.”

Shiori returned her greeting with an elegant smile, tossing the extra large garbage bag in her hands towards the collection station with an action that did not seem to take much effort.

At the same time, she piled up the other garbage bags that were carelessly placed here and there that were blocking the road.

”That’s fine.”

After adjusting the anti-crow net, Shiori patted away the dust on her hands and straightened her body once more.

”Sora-chan, aren’t you early today.”

”Ah, that’s right…… Err, I just woke up earlier than usual today.”

Sora lied.

The onee-san before her whose mature actions were like that of a graceful lady looked left and right for a moment, speaking by Sora’s ears after that:

”That’s right, there was an unfamiliar man at your house yesterday, right?”

Shiori asked in a low voice.

”I bumped into that person at the entrance just now, and I have this feeling that he likes to act all friendly with other people…… Is that really okay? Although it’s somewhat meddlesome for me to say this, that person seems like he’s from a nightclub.”

—*She’s talking about Nimura-san.* Sora immediately thought.

According to Yuuta, Nimura is the type of person who flirts with women very naturally.

He said that the habit is nearly instinctive, while he, himself, seems not to have the self-consciousness about that, so it’s useless even if one reminds him about it. If so, he probably greeted Shiori in a similar way just now.

Speaking of which, they met during the Shichi-Go-San as well, so not knowing each other isn’t quite true……

”Nimura-san is Onii-cha…… Oji-san’s college friend. He’s a very nice person, and didn’t he come during the Shichi-Go-San as well?”

”Is that so? Is there a bespectacled person like that…… But since Sora-chan said that, I’ll definitely believe it, of course.”

Although this neighbor, Kitahara Shiori, who lives opposite them, is a beautiful, friendly and capable person, her views seem to be quite traditional, and she has the tendency of disliking males.

”But nobody knows when men will have bad thoughts, so you have to be careful as well. If you encounter any problems, remember to discuss things with Onee-san immediately.”

Apart from that, she tends to think too much about things as well.

That caused Sora to respond with an vague smile. *He’s actually a good person……* She protested in her heart.

I opened my eyes, and realized that the time for breakfast had long passed.

”Uwaa! Why is the alarm clock turned off!? Why didn’t I just tell Nimura to wake me up……”

The house felt exceptionally quiet. Judging from the situation, it should be the time when the morning chores were all finished.

”……. I was always lying, and I messed things up this time as well.”

Sora-chan and the others already went out before I had the chance to meet them, how regretful.

That time, the long forgotten hunger suddenly assaulted, thus I decided to go to the kitchen first.

Nobody could be seen in the house. Instead, my breakfast was placed on the dining table, and also Nimura’s note.

”*’There’s salad in the fridge’*, huh……”

While pondering where I saw such a note before, I opened the freezer of the fridge, finding salad for one person on a beautiful plate in it after that.

Just at that moment, I suddenly remembered the first salad that Sora-chan made.

Although it was just lettuce torn open, tossed into a plate, and saying that it was a salad was somewhat forced, thinking that it was breakfast that Sora-chan made for me made me quite touched.

Speaking from this angle, though the thing that I planned to eat looked like a high class salad from a trendy hotel, I wasn't too moved. I felt somewhat amused by my own mentalities, and at the same time, my guilt of not completing the duties that I was in charge of intensified.

"Let's just go to school……"

I, who thought of at least prioritizing my studies, stood up after swallowing the toast and salad with milk.

As I haven't bathed for about two days, if possible, I would be happy to bathe before I went out, but if I did so, I might be unable to make it to my afternoon classes.

"Oh, that's right, I'll put the cabbage rolls yesterday in the freezer as well."

I remembered that there were still cabbage rolls in the wok that Nimura made the previous night.

As he asked me to put the food left into the freezer, I placed them in a random container, and was about to keep it in the fridge, but since the fridge was too full, I couldn't find the space to put it in.

"That's strange, why is this……?"

Behind the frozen food and dishes made beforehand, there seemed to be a small container as well.

Although I understood that I did not have enough time to think too much about it, the container with a note stuck onto it really made me curious.

A date was written on the note in handwriting that was familiar to me.

”Guwagh! It’s all white!”

When I opened the container for a look, I understood what it contained.

That thing was kept in the fridge for quite a long time, and its surface that lost moisture was spread full of frost. Defrosting it to eat might be slightly dangerous.

The date on the note was ‘8/14’, which would be one day before I came to stay at this house.

”Ahh…… Is it possible that Nee-san made this……?”

The time in the container stilled from summer until now.

After classes ended, Sora went to the music room and saw that Hanamura Youko had already arrived.

Youko, who was reading a book before her piano on the seat exclusive to her, raised her head after noticing Sora’s presence.

”Good day, Takanashi-san.”

Although saying ‘good day’ to a person who was in the same classroom as her just awhile ago might be somewhat strange, but that is how the student called Hanamura Youko acts usually. Her personality is that of a silent person that wouldn’t give people a good first impression, and even if she speaks, she usually says unnatural, roundabout words, and is always sarcastic as well.

Before this, Sora was not too familiar with her as well, but because of some reasons, the distance between the two shortened. The main reason would be because they have similar interests.

”Hanamura-san, here’s your manga back.”

”Oh…… How was it?”

”Mnn, it’s great! Not only are there many beautiful characters, each character has depth as well, while the girls are all cute and good looking……. Ahh!”

After speaking her thoughts in excitement, Sora noticed in shock that because of her excitement, her side that she wouldn’t usually show at school was exposed, causing her to be somewhat harried.

“Ah, I…… Just now……”

“That’s fine, I know that Takanashi-san is a person from this world.”

After saying that, Youko gave a ‘Fufufu……’ laugh, laughter like those of anime characters.

“However, it’s great that you like it.”

“Mnn, mnn.”

Sora was grateful for the fact that someone could recommend great manga for her, while having a person who understands her special interests to talk to made her happy as well, but Sora kept having a feeling that her weak point was being held.

“That’s right, as I recall, I told you not to call me ‘Hanamura-san’, right?”

“Ah…… Err…… Sorry.”

“I don’t like my name very much, it feels quite stupid.”

After saying that, Youko deliberately adjusted her glasses.

“In my family, my parents and my brother have a strong sense of fervor. No matter what they do, they’d just complete things with vigor and

determination, just like the name, having only a garden of flowers in their minds at any time. It's really annoying."

"Ahaha……"

Sora couldn't imagine what kind of person her friend's brother would be, and his personality seems to be completely opposite to that of Youko's as well. A hot-blooded brother and a cold sister, that made the thought of wanting to see them together arise in Sora's mind.

"That's why, Takanashi-san, just call me by my name."

"Err……"

To Sora, who is shy with unfamiliar people, calling a person apart from her family by his or her name would require a lot of courage.

However, the girl called Hanamura Youko is a person that Sora cannot go against as well.

"Well then…… Err……. Youko, chan?"

"That's fine."

Youko gave a rare smile.

"…… Well…… erm, you can……. Um……"

Clearly saying that she wishes for the opposing party to call her by name as well caused Sora to feel a strange sense of shyness.

Although Youko once called her 'Sora-chan', she reverted to Sora's surname not long after that.

Thinking that Youko might not like to call each other by name made Sora feel somewhat lacking in confidence.

“Good afternoo~n!”

Just at that moment, the door of the music room was roughly pushed open, while the other members of the Choir Club walked inside.

The person at the very front would be Maeshima Daiki.

“Good afternoon.”

The next person to enter was Tani Shuuji. Both of them were Sora’s classmates.

The regrettable thing was that the time for conversation ended just like that. Actually, Sora joined another club when she returned to the Choir Club as well, and that would be the Literary Club where Youko acts as the club president.

In the club where only Sora and Youko were in, the time for the activities was only a mere ten minutes before the members of the Choir Club arrive at the clubroom to undergo the activities of the club.

Even so, being able to make a friend who can talk about their similar interests was still a happy thing to Sora.

“Y- Yo, Takanashi. How are you?”

Daiki greeted Sora rigidly while unnaturally raising his voice.

“F- Fine……”

Sora, who did not know how to respond, could only give a random answer.

“Daiki, seriously……”

“W- What is it! Did I say anything strange?”

Seeing Shuuji press his hand on his head in helplessness, Daiki asked, flustered.

The public had long known the fact that Daiki had a crush on Sora.

The only ones who didn't know about that were probably just the two of concern.

Furthermore, not only was Sora ignorant of the fact that Daiki had a crush on her, she would sometimes shy away when she met Daiki as well. And actually, it was all because of Daiki's overly passionate personality……

Just thinking that the distance between the two definitely wouldn't shorten made Shuuji sigh.

"I- I say, Takanashi, if there's a chance next time……"

"Is there anything wrong……?"

Facing Daiki, who was being hesitant about his words, Sora was quite troubled as well.

"This guy wants to apologize to your uncle."

"Ehh…… Why? If it's about the matter some time before this, didn't you already apologize?"

Sora said in puzzlement.

"I- I can't explain about the reason, but I have something that I must apologize to him for."

"If you say that, wouldn't that trouble Takanashi-san even more?"

"Stop fussing! Shuuji, just shut up!"

After complaining to Shuuji, Daiki solemnly faced Sora.

“Can’t you just talk to my uncle directly?”

“Err…… I haven’t prepared myself mentally yet.”

That caused Sora to be even more confused about the situation. Actually, only Yuuta and Daiki knew about that matter— the fact that Daiki once scolded Yuuta because of a misunderstanding before his visit to Sora that caused him to embarrass himself.

However, probably because of his moral principles, Yuuta did not seem to have told Sora about that matter, and because of that, Daiki felt even more embarrassed to apologize to Yuuta himself.

“I want to ask Takanashi to help me pass this message to him: ‘I was too arrogant, sorry’.”

Even though she was not sure what occurred, judging from Daiki’s solemn look, Sora could still understand that it was a rather important matter.

“Mnn, I understa—“

“Take thaaaaaaaaaaaaat!”

Just when Sora was about to nod in agreement, a silhouette dashed into the music room. After toppling Daiki with a grand sliding tackle, the person straddled Daiki with fluid movements, fixing him in place after that.

“You perverted kiiiiiiiid! What did you do to my Sora-chaaaaaaaaaaan!”

“Owowowowowowowowow!? Buchou, I give, I give!”

“Uooooooooo! I’m breaking your hiiiiiiiiiiiiip!”

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

“Ah— Buchou, if this continues, Daiki’s bones will really fracture.”

As the sounds of Daiki's bones fracturing could almost be heard, Shuuji had no other choice but to stop her.

"Hmph! How's that? Are you feeling even the slightest bit of repentance?"

"I didn't do anything……"

After tossing Daiki, who had already lost his will of battle, the president of the Choir Club, Okae Kiyomi, wiped away the sweat on her forehead. On the other hand, the other club members entered the music room right after that as though they were expecting the time for the end of the battle.

"That's right, what were you talking about just now? Although there's no proper reason for this, I just decided to hand out a punishment?"

"You did that for no reason at all?! You nearly paralyzed me for life!"

"Relax, even if you die, there are still many excellent members in the Choir Club."

"That's not even the main point!"

Ignoring Daiki's protests, Kiyomi turned around to say to Sora:

"Takanashi-san, if you hate the idiot over there, just say directly that you hate him. I'll vanquish him immediately."

"Vanquish my foot! Urgh!"

"Look, Takanashi-san, you don't need to hold back."

"Buchou, your face…… Is too near……"

"Eh? What's that? I can't hear you properly."

Kiyomi continually approached Sora's side. Possibly because of her excitement, Kiyomi's eyes were laced with strands of blood, while her breathing was rather ragged as well.

"Fufufu…… I'm the club president, and consoling the club members is my job as well. So you don't need to be so nervous, just relax……"

"No! Buchou's gaze is really strange!"

Smack!

"Buchou, we're all here."

Youko forcefully hit Kiyomi's head using a rolled up score, and spoke as though nothing happened after that.

"Ah…… T- That's true."

After Kiyomi, who came to her senses, walked away, Sora finally let loose a breath in relief.

Kiyomi, who daringly declared that she '*founded the Choir Club just for cute girls to line up before her'*, as she said, is a person who likes cute girls very much, and it was so serious that she was only a step from falling into darkness.

"Well then, let us begin the club activities. Girls, move chairs over here and gather, while the boys…… Just look for a place to sit on the floor."

Just like that, Kiyomi, who treated the girls with extreme affection, practically treated the boys like rocks by the road.

"Okay, allow me to talk about today's topic."

After reaffirming that everyone were present, Kiyomi started to write on the blackboard.

Christmas Performance—

Those words appeared on the blackboard.

“Since first years might not know of this, I shall explain this first, as usual.”

According to Kiyomi, the music-oriented clubs from neighboring schools would always gather on each Christmas, holding a concert. And of course, it’s a given that the Choir Club would join, while the Woodwind Club, Light Music Club and even the folk music oriented clubs would join as well.

All gains of the concert would be donated to charity organizations, so it counts as a charity event as well.

However, it would not be just any charity event. As the clubs from neighboring schools gather, competition would naturally arise, so it was said to be an unexpectedly serious concert.

“That’s how things are. Everyone, don’t just do things sloppily, as we’ll be looked down by the neighboring schools for a whole year if we perform badly.”

Kiyomi continued to speak after forcefully pounding on the blackboard:

“The clubs are having practices every day, so each and every school have a certain degree of proficiency. Apart from that, there are many types of clubs taking part as well, while the audiences are outsiders as well. Thus, the ones who can get the favor of the audience will be the winner.”

“Buchou, I have a question.”

“Speak, the one with the side partings.”

With the thought of *’Is it possible that Buchou doesn’t remember my name……?’*, the boy who was called by Kiyomi by his hairstyle stood up while being slightly queasy about the meaning of his existence.

“Basically, what should we do? Choosing songs is a given, and there’s the problem of dividing us into groups……”

“In any case, our target is to be eye-catching enough!”

A completely unmodified answer came from Kiyomi.

“Just like that, I, Okae Kiyomi thought of an extremely great idea!”

For some reason, Kiyomi walked to Sora’s side with large steps and tapped on her shoulders.

“In this Christmas performance, we’re settling on Takanashi-san as the main character!”

“Eh…… Ehhhhhhhhh!?”

After the lag of one second, Sora gave a loud shriek.

“I’ve already prepared a song with a solo part, so do your best, Takanashi-san.”

“P- Please wait for a moment! I…… um…… That will trouble me a lot!”

Sora hurriedly shook hear head when she heard Kiyomi triumphantly saying all that while winking at her.

“Relax, with Takanashi-san’s abilities, it’ll definitely be fine ☆

“But I just came back……”

“That’s why we need to do this! We have to use this opportunity to allow the other schools to know about Takanashi Sora’s existence!”

“And why do we need the other schools to know this?”

“If so, we can show off to the other school that my Choir Club has su~ch a cute girl!”

Kiyomi answered Shuuji’s question in excitement.

“No, I…… That’s too…… And I just returned……”

Sora cowered so much that she almost couldn’t be seen. The various troubles that occurred after her parents disappeared forced Sora to leave her club. She only changed her mind after her kind club president convinced her and because of Maeshima’s actions as well.

“I didn’t practice for a long time now…… Besides, it’ll be too rude to everyone.”

“…… It isn’t rude at all, Takanashi-san. Everyone in our club was waiting for your return. It’s not just me, it’s everyone, every- one~ That’s the main point.”

Kiyomi looked at the others, and all of them nodded.

“Relax, Sora-chan. You can definitely do it, and your voice is very melodious as well.”

Sora heard Youko praise her singing voice, and also…… Youko called her by name.

“Hana…… Youko-chan!”

The surprised Sora looked at Youko’s face, while Youko gazed at Sora with a smile as well.

“I think that Takanashi will be fine as well.”

“That’s right, I think that Takanashi-san is the prime candidate.”

After Youko, Daiki and Shuuji spoke to recommend Sora as well.

Not only them, the other club members gathered in the music room were fine with Sora being the main vocal as well.

The one who was troubled was Sora herself instead, and it was hard to refuse with everyone's recommendations.

However…… Everyone probably forgot. Sora thought to herself.

Sora was actually a person that easily gets nervous, and was shy with unfamiliar people as well.

"Singing in front of everyone, I'd easily make mistakes……"

"Relax, I have a great idea. Let's invite your uncle to the performance as well! Miu-chan and the others as well!"

"E- EHHHHH!"

Unusually, Sora raised her voice and shouted.

"The Christmas concert is open to public, so anyone can go. Aren't you energetic when you speak to your uncle? So you'll probably be more relaxed if they come as well, right?"

"T- That's…… I'll be even more……"

The club president, Kiyomi, did not notice Sora's shock or Daiki's complicated expression, and continued to speak:

"Please, Takanashi-san. For the Choir Club, and for yourself as well. Plus, part of it is for me as well, so please accept the solo part of the concert!"

Kiyomi held Sora's hands tightly while looking at her with a passionate gaze.

In older manga or animes, forgetting to do one's homework would usually result in punishment of standing in the corridors.

However, if students are punished to stand in the corridors, the progress of the students' studies would fall back as well, and the most important thing would be because it might be said to be a 'corporal punishment', causing problems because of that.

In truth, almost no one has the experience of being punished to stand in the corridors now.

In modern times when almost no one would be called out to stand in the corridors during their mandatory education, how many people in Japan would still have the experience of such an experience after becoming a college student? I, Segawa Yuuta, really wish to loudly ask this question to the whole world.

…… The main point is, what am I trying to say right now?

Currently, how rare of a situation am I experiencing, as I am holding pails full of water in the corridor with the piercing wind?

"Segawa-kun, are you awake now?"

"Ah, yes, completely awake."

I heard the lecturer ask in the classroom, so I poked my head into the classroom entrance as well.

I saw the lecturer wave at me, gesturing for me to return to the classroom, while I tried to maintain my smile while returning to my seat. Blast, it's just a yawn, is there a need to punish me by calling me out to the corridors?

It made my hands numb, legs cold, and caused me to be laughed at by the students passing by.

“How is it? Judging from your expression, it doesn’t seem like you’ve repented much.”

“H- How can that be? There’s no such thing! Really! I’ve reflected on myself!”

Uh oh! This is bad, bad. My true intents seemed to have been exposed on my face.

I hastily changed my expression, while the recess bell rang right at that moment as well.

The professor specially gave me a warning before leaving the classroom.

“Segawa-chan, what were you thinking?”

After the professor left, Nimura walked over while holding in his laughter.

“In any case, you shouldn’t sleep in Hachinohe-sensei’s class, don’t you know that?”

“I know. I know that, it’s just that I couldn’t hold in my sleepiness.”

In Hachinohe-sensei’s classes, one absolutely can’t doze off or do other matters.

This is something that is known by all students in Tama Literary College. If he catches any students dozing off or using their cellphones, they would be punished in a special way.

It is said that there was once a student who sent a message to his girlfriend in class, and he was asked to hand in a report with the topic ‘A love letter to a girlfriend’. Apart from that, someone was caught doodling on the author’s photo of a textbook, and the student had to accept the punishment of the same doodles being drawn on his own face.

Just standing in the corridors is actually quite a light punishment from Hachinohe-sensei's standards.

"My condition of not getting enough sleep is too serious."

I couldn't help but complain to Nimura.

"From your recent situation, it'll be a huge matter if you are just absent from class."

"Yeah."

In any case, although I had some trouble, the classes are finally over for today.

I don't need to work today as well, so I'll just go back home for a nap first.

Besides, there are still a lot of reports waiting for me to finish as well.

"Segawa-chan, will you come to the clubroom today?"

"Ah…… I'll pass for today. Tell Sako-senpai that I said hello."

"No problem."

I bid farewell to Nimura after quickly keeping my stuff, and headed towards the parking lot of bicycles.

About two hours would be required for me to reach my home at Ikebukuro from here. And the distance that I don't usually mind feels exceptionally long to me right now.

While whistling, Nimura Kouichi walked in the corridors of the club building with a leisurely pace. After walking past a coarse cement floor, he walked past a similarly coarse steel door.

“Good afternoon~”

There were already two people inside. When they heard Nimura’s greeting, one of them raised his head in slight agitation.

“…... Huh, so it’s Nimura-kun.”

“That’s somewhat mean.”

Nimura placed his bag by a wardrobe and sat down by his senpai.

“…… Where’s Yuuta?”

“He already went home.”

Facing Raika’s question, Nimura shrugged and answered in slight helplessness. As Yuuta was busy with his reports, he did not show up at the clubroom often, so that was why the two senpais were always in that state. Although Nimura thought that they should just visit Yuuta at his house if they were really so worried of him, but they did not seem to be able to make the decision so easily.

“Sigh~ Segawa-kun isn’t here, it’s so lonely~”

“Am I not enough?”

“Nimura-kun, you’re not the type of person in charge of being made fun of.”

Sako-senpai is right. Leave something like that to Yuuta.

In any case, the two senpais seem to like Yuuta quite a lot.

Of course, it wasn’t like Nimura didn’t understand their thoughts.

After all, when they were together with Yuuta, even he would unconsciously feel relaxed.

The person called Nimura Kouichi is quite confident with his looks and intelligence, and is a person quite good at dealing with other people as well. Up till now, he hasn't yet experienced any days that can count as harsh. Parties, clubs, working, playing along with women with a leisurely attitude, and looking for some company to work at in the end. About his four years of college life, Nimura probably had that kind of thoughts.

However, in better terms, that means that he doesn't have any plans at all.

Even so, he did a lot to help Segawa Yuuta.

In the eyes of some people, Yuuta had experienced a startling life of trials and tribulations, and from a certain perspective, his life can be said as unfortunate as well. However, Yuuta did not complain about the situation that he was in, passing his days with a rather optimistic attitude. Seeing such a friend caused Nimura to have a wish to help him out unconditionally.

Recently, compared with the time that he spent fooling around with women, Nimura spent more time with Yuuta instead.

Even so, Nimura still believed that his days were quite fulfilling.

The two senpais probably had the same thoughts as well.

After Nimura Kouichi explained to himself in his heart, he couldn't help but laugh out loud.

"Why did you laugh?"

"Eh…… Did I laugh just now?"

Raika stared at Nimura's face unblinkingly and nodded. It was probably the first time that she, who differs from other people, expressed such a strong interest in Nimura.

"It's nothing. I'm just thinking that Segawa-chan is quite popular."

Raika still stared at Nimura's face.

"Sigh~ When Segawa-kun isn't here, it's so boring so boring so boring~"

After saying that, Sako-senpai finally couldn't stand it anymore, and started to throw a tantrum like a child.

"If so, wouldn't it be better if I didn't tell him about the reports in the first place?"

"Won't he repeat the grade if so?"

After Nimura said that, Sako-senpai started to pout.

However, he continued as though he thought of something……

"Ah, but he repeats the grade, he'll be able to stay at Hachiouji for a longer period of time."

"But if the matter of Sako-senpai pulling strings in the dark, causing him to repeat the grade, is exposed, even Yuuta would probably hate you. And if Miu-chan and the others know about it, it'll definitely be……"

"T- That's true~"

Sako-senpai laughed while having cold sweat. From the looks, it seemed to be true.

"However……"

That moment, Raika suddenly spoke.

"I won't be here starting from next year."

"Ah……"

Everyone only recalled the fact at that moment. There were two campuses for Tama Literary College. From the laboratories that the students require, some of them would have to study at the campus at Shinjuku.

“However, the Shinjuku campus is actually nearer to Segawa-chan’s house.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Raika pounded her fist on her palm in realization.

“Then we can hang out together everyday.”

Raika showed a rare look of excitement.

Although she was still wearing a poker face, Nimura could already distinguish such an extent of change.

“Seriously, why is Segawa-chan away at these times……”

Thinking that Segawa Yuuta always chose the wrong time to be absent caused the good looking man who secretly cared of him sigh.

“Sigh……”

On the way back home, Sora sighed for the umpteenth time.

In the end, concerning the Christmas performance, Sora had no other choice but to accept the proposal due to the club president and the other members’ pressure.

“Sigh……”

Sora sighed yet again.

The fact that everyone was willing to hand the solo part to her was a fact to be proud of, while Sora was grateful of the thoughts of the club president

and club members as well. And of course, Sora was happy for that as well. It was just that she hadn't steeled herself for it yet.

If it were to be Miu, she would probably say: "Compared with the cosplay event before this, it's much better', but that would be another story.

"Sigh……"

The number of sighs that Sora made already couldn't be counted anymore.

The other pressing problem would be: Should she tell this to her family members? Especially that person.

If she spoke about it, he would definitely go.

Just imagining herself singing before that person caused Sora's hear to almost prance out from her mouth.

Her club president's proposal had a very strong negative effect. Just like that, Sora, who walked back home with heavy footsteps, suddenly noticed a mother holding the hand of a primary school boy while holding a shopping bag in another hand.

"Ahh…… I have to fetch Hina!"

Sora hurriedly went back on the road that she just walked on.

When she reached the kindergarten, Sora bumped into Shiori, who was just about to take Hina home.

"It's Onee-tan!"

Hina forcefully waved at Sora with her other hand that was not holding Shiori's hand.

"What is it, Sora-chan? Why are you so harried?"

After seeing Sora's arrival, Shiori looked rather surprised.

"…… W- Why…… is Shiori-san……"

"Eh? Do you need to ask? Didn't we talk about this before? You had club activities today, isn't that right?"

From some time before, the job of taking Hina home had been handed to Shoiri.

If they spoke of it in the morning, she thought that fetching Hina home by herself by would be better. Sora really felt that she couldn't be of help.

"……. Sorry! Shiori-san!"

"Eh?"

Seeing Sora suddenly apologize to her in an exaggerated manner caused Shiori to be even more surprised.

"Sorry, I kept giving Shiori-san trouble."

"It doesn't matter, since it's along the way from my school as well."

On the road where the three walked home together, Shiori's friendly comment made Sora feel rather guilty.

"I'm really useless……"

"Seriously, you're just thinking too much."

"But…… Shiori-san, you probably want to hang out with your friends after school or attend club activities, right?"

"You're so kind, Sora-chan."

The kind one should be Shiori-san instead. Sora understood that even the statement just now was probably spoken to reduce Sora's burden.

“What must I do…… To be the same as Shiori-san……”

With her head lowered, Sora spoke in a small voice.

“Sora-chan, you’re a very kind child, so kind that it even worries people somewhat.”

“Worry…… I’m indeed still unreliable……”

“Ah! I don’t mean that!”

Shiori, who hated males, still couldn’t trust Yuuta a lot, and was worried that he would one day extend his evil claws to the pure, innocent Sora……

“Sora-chan, can you tell me why you think that?”

After hearing Shiori’s friendly question, Sora nodded and spoke of the matters troubling her.

Among those, there were the matters of everyone helping her rejoin her club, and the fact that the housework still fell on the shoulders of Miu, a primary school student, and Yuuta, who was busy with his reports and his part time work, even though they’ve already agreed on a shift system.

That caused Sora to feel as though she was scolded to be useless. It turned out like this just because I didn’t put in enough effort— Sora couldn’t help but think of such thoughts.

In the end, Sora spoke of the fact that she was given a solo part in the concert of the Choir Club.

“I really wanted to do the housework, but Onii-chan told me that I don’t need to.”

“It’s your uncle’s fault.”

Shiori spoke in a determined manner.

“Actually ignoring a girl’s efforts, he’s really the worst!”

“…… T- That’s right!”

“Then, is Oi-tan a bad kid?”

Although Hina asked in puzzlement, the two who were discussing in excitement did not hear it.

“I’m really not a child anymore! Ah, well, though I’m still a middle schooler, I’m still the eldest sister!”

“That’s right! Sora-chan can definitely take care of both housework and the club activities!”

“Shiori-san!”

“Sora-chan!”

“Shiori-san, you’re right! I will do my best!”

“I support you! And I’ll help as well! Just tell me if there’s anything I can help with!”

With Shiori’s encouragement, Sora started to burn with vigor.

Looking at the two who were looking at each other while holding each other’s hands in the evening streets made Hina, who raised her head to look at them, look rather confused.

That moment, nobody knew what that would result in yet.

Chapter 3 – Because We're a Family?

A week passed in the blink of an eye.

When November was almost ending, my reports were still unfinished.

I drank some tea in the living room, and couldn't help but sigh when I thought of that.

Before my eyes, there was a solo concert of consolation for me.

"Bun~ny, bun~ny, ju~mp ju~mp ♪"

While holding her favorite bunny doll, Hina sang her 'Bunny Jump Song' that was her favorite as well.

It was a theme song that had both original lyrics and rhythm.

"Bunny bunny~ Punch!"

All of a sudden, the baby bunny's paw pressed onto my forehead.

"What is it……?"

"Ngh, Oi-tan is so stong! Bunny is in danger! Earh is in danger!"

It seemed like I was being set up as some sort of evil monster, while the baby bunny was a defender of justice.

"Fuhahaha! Do you think you can defeat me with such tiny power?"

If I don't play along, I can't count as a man…… No, an uncle.

I opened my arms wide, making an expression like that of a baddie.

"Ngh~ I won't let go of you! Oi-tan demon!"

"Very well, give me all you have! I shall show you my power!"

Being given a name that was thought of by a child, I immediately plunged into the role of an antagonist.

I used all my power, making all sorts of poses.

“Ahahaha! Oi-tan is funny!”

“Ehhhh!? Why are you not playing your role right now!? I’d feel very embarrassed like this, you know!?”

“Now! Take that!”

Just when I got careless, I was attacked with a kick.

And that time, it wasn’t from the bunny doll, but from Hina herself.

“Isn’t that too despicable, Hina?”

“Oi-tan is big, so it doesn’t matter!”

For some reason, her words seemed quite reasonable as well.

“Hah! Hah!”

“Ouch! Don’t kick my shin! It really hurts!”

“Hahaha…… So your weakness is here!”

“Why you~…… Then take this!”

Thwack!

I did a light karate chop on the head of Hina’s coveted bunny doll that she was holding.

“Ahhh~! That’s against the rules! You can’t bully Mr. Bunny!”

“It’s so hard to grasp. Well then, what should Oi-tan do?”

“Erm, erm, bunny will fly over after this, and Oi-tan has to be defeated after crying out loud!”

“Well isn’t the situation changing quickly…… Okay! I understand now! Wahahaha! Give me all you have!”

I tried to play out the role of the baddie according to Hina’s script. It really felt somewhat embarrassing.

“I’m coming! Hah!”

The bunny doll in Hina’s hands spun and rushed towards me.

Using a full body assault as the final killer technique does have the feel of an ending.

After my abdomen was hit with the secret technique of the baby bunny in Hina’s hands, I exaggeratedly bent my back and fell backwards.

“Guwaa! I’m finished!”

Even I felt that I played the role quite well. I have to say, it was a high level performance that even took into account the cushion behind me. After that, I saw Hina’s Mr. Bunny standing on my abdomen, making a victory pose.

“Wahaha! Now the world is mine!”

“Ehhhh!? So the bunny is the bad one!?”

What an unexpected twist, the creativity of a toddler really can’t be looked down on……

However, the true battle had yet to occur, and it wasn’t comparable with the Mr. Bunny demon king.

“Let me make it!”

The battlefield was the kitchen.

Sora-chan and I were glaring at each other for almost thirty minutes.

“Didn’t I say that it would be fine if I make it!”

Compared to I, who was holding a carrot in one hand and a paring knife in another, Sora-chan was holding a rolling pin and a mixer. Despite the overwhelming difference in attack strength, that part could still be remedied with the wisdom and courage of an elder. Both Sora-chan and I formed an unyielding stance.

“The one on duty today is me, which means, I have the right to make it!”

“Onii-chan, you still have a lot of reports to finish! You don’t have time anymore, so don’t meddle in things over here!”

And of course, I had already mentally prepared myself for this.

I am not planning to make the dumb mistake of taking care both my school and my work, but neglecting my job as a father for the second time.

“I must make the dinner today no matter what!”

“No! Since I can use the precious kitchen for a long time in the holidays, I definitely wouldn’t yield!”

Our gazes clashed, creating sparks in the air.

From the time when I first knew Sora-chan, it seemed like we never clashed so vigorously before.

However, I definitely wouldn’t yield no matter what.

Because, for Hina’s Christmas bento, I, as her Papa, must definitely take on the responsibility of cooking it myself.

It all started when we were eating dinner the previous night.

“Christmas party……?”

I was wondering if I heard wrong, so I spoke to reaffirm it.

“Hamunchmunch richewchew!”

When I just finished speaking, Hina, whose mouth was full of boiled egg, answered like that.

“Um…… Hina, why don’t you speak after you finish eating?”

Following my instructions, Hina explained to me after swallowing her boiled egg:

“The kindygarten teacher said, on Chrismas, she’ll give Hina a cake thi~s big!”

It felt like she was somewhat off-topic.

After Hina finished, Sora-chan took out an information letter and continued the explanation.

“On the day of Christmas, it seems like the kindergarten is going to hold a small party.”

“Oh, I see. So does that mean that the principal will treat everyone to cake?”

“Yes. It seems like there will be a movie showing and performances as well, so they’re asking the parents to attend as well. Apart from that, because of the event, they’re not providing food that day, so it seems like we have to bring bento ourselves.”

“Is that so……”

Since we can see Hina performing, there’s no reason for us not to go.

However, Christmas, huh?

It's already near Christmas now, time really flies.

"Okay! Hina, Oi-tan will go!"

"Hina can play together with Oi-tan then!"

"Besides, I'll prepare a super luxurious bento, so look forward to it."

"Wa! Bento! Then, then! Hina wants a panda one!"

"Mnn! Leave it to Oi-tan! I'll definitely make an extremely sumptuous one!"

I forcefully pounded on my chest in affirmation. I had already predicted that such a thing would happen, so I bought 'Ways to Make Character Bentos' some time before this. Although bragging isn't good, I'm actually quite confident with the nimbleness of my crafts.

Then allow me to make a top level character bento that would make all of the people at the kindergarten jealous!

"Since we've already decided, then I'll start to prepare from tomorr……"

"Wait a minute, Onii-chan."

Just at that moment, Sora-chan interjected.

"I'm making it."

"Eh……"

"Hina's bento. Let me make it!"

For some reason, Sora-chan looked rather fierce and glared at me while saying so.

"Wait a sec, Sora-chan, you still have your clubs……"

“That doesn’t matter. I can take care of both of them.”

“Onee-chan, is that really fine? Isn’t the end of semester test coming soon?”

Miu-chan picked the perfect time to speak.

“I can take care of that as well!”

Sora-chan’s tone turned even harsher. That time, of course, I had no idea that Sora-chan’s determination got firmer because of her chat with Shiori-chan, so her unexpected response caused me to be rather harried.

“No, but……”

“Onii-chan, don’t you have reports to finish as well!”

She hit a sore spot. Even though most of them had already been finished, it was only a few days until the winter break as well.

By the way, the end of semester test would be waiting for me after the end of the winter break. If my results weren’t good enough, I would still face the crisis of repeating the grade. However, I still wanted to do all the housework I could, and I couldn’t increase Sora-chan’s burdens as well.

“In any case, I’m going to make Hina’s bento. Sora-chan, you should just focus on your school work and your club.”

“What do you mean by in any case! That’s too overbearing!”

Sora-chan did not have any intention of yielding at all, so she and I started to glare at each other.

“Sigh……”

Miu-chan heaved a large sigh.

Just like that, we did not come to an agreement……. And it went on right until now.

The two warriors of the kitchen were still glaring at each other.

“Onii-chan, why aren’t you finishing your reports in your room!?”

“You should go to your club instead!”

“What a pity! It’s Sunday today!”

“There should be club practices on Sunday or something like that as well!”

The level of our debate dropped lower and lower.

“Seriously, you’re still quarreling?”

Miu-chan, who just finished drying the clothes, looked at us in helplessness.

“Miu-chan, help me talk to her about this as well. Children should listen to adults instead.”

“Onii-chan, aren’t you still a student as well? If so, you’re the same as us!”

“C- College students are only a step from being an adult, so that doesn’t count!”

In the end, we started a meaningless debate yet again, while Miu-chan just shrugged in helplessness at a side.

Just at that moment……

“Uuu~…… Oi-tan and Nee-tan, you can’t argue!”

It was Hina.

While tightly hugging her bunny doll, she wore a expression as though she was going to cry at any moment.

“L- Listen to Onee-chan, Hina, we’re not arguing……”

“That’s right, that’s right. We’re just in an overly hot discussion.”

“Sob…… Sob……”

Even though we hastily consoled her, it was already too late.

Hina started to cry like a broken dam.

“Ahh~ Seriously, you made her cry.”

“W- What should we do now? Miu-chan~”

“We didn’t want this……”

Seeing us in helplessness, Miu-chan couldn’t stand it and squatted before Hina.

“Hina, Onee-chan and Oji-san aren’t arguing at all.”

“Really……?”

“Mnn, Onee-chan never lied to you before, right?”

Hina nodded.

After that, Hina sniffled loudly.

“So don’t cry anymore, okay? That’s right, do you want to go out for a walk with Miu Nee-chan?”

“For a walk?”

“We’re going to the shopping center near the station to play.”

“Mnn! Okay!”

It seemed like Hina’s mood had already turned for the better.

Not only that, she urged Miu-chan to set out quicker as well.

“That’s why…… Oji-san~”

The hand that Miu-chan extended to me definitely had a certain meaning.

I fished out three one thousand yen notes from my wallet and handed it to Miu-chan.

“Well then, we’re going out~ Make up before we’re back now~”

Miu-chan brought Hina out directly.

We, who lost our battle spirits in an instant, glanced at each other, and our faces reddened in embarrassment.

We could only feel regret for making Hina cry, and reflected on our childish behavior.

However, if I yielded just like that, Sora-chan would definitely force herself to make the bento for Hina. She, who was bad at cooking in the first place, would use up a long time for the preparations.

If I let go just like that, that would mean that I lost.

Just when I was thinking of a good reason to convince Sora-chan, she spoke in a low voice before me:

“Onii-chan…… What are you planning to do?”

“Uuu…… W- Well…… Because Hina likes hamburger steak, I’m planning to make a hamburger steak bento modeled on a panda.

“I’m thinking of using home made noodles to make the spaghetti that Hina likes so much……”

…… As I had expected, Sora-chan was indeed planning to make a dish that requires additional energy, even though she wasn't that good at cooking. Speaking of which, my hamburger steak was basically frozen food as well, while the character bento would be made in accordance to the instructions in the book……

"…… Ah."

Just at that moment, I recalled a certain thing.

The small container in the depths of the fridge.

The container that stored tomato sauce from last summer.

"…… Sora-chan, let me tell you……"

I decided to inform Sora-chan of that matter. I just felt that I should do that.

Even in Ikebukuro, where a large amount of huge electronic stores and supermarkets are built, that gives people the impression of a shopping city, a large residential areas can still be seen if one walks for a bit.

Between the large condominiums that were built in times of better economy, scattered buildings could still be seen occasionally. Despite the fact that most of the residents there were people who migrated there when the station was built, only that area still had residents that stayed there when Ikebukuro was still a farming village.

The Takanashi family can be classified as the latter. They owned a building at the top level road in Ikebukuro, and had once owned numerous lands nearby, which means that they were once what we call landlords. Even so, that was a thing of the past.

Currently, only the land where the house about fifteen minutes from the station on foot was their remaining land.

Even so, the busy district was within walking distance from their house. To children in primary school, it was an environment that anyone would be envious of, and thus Miu was the target of admiration of her classmates. To Miu herself, just like her long, blonde hair, it was something that she secretly felt proud of in her heart. If she had any complaints, it would probably be the slope before the entrance of her house.

Walking down the slope when they were going out would not be an issue, but when they were going home with their hands full, it would be quite a headache. However, even when it's a slope like that, it was not a problem for a three year old toddler at all.

"Ice cream~ Ice cream~! Want to eat ice cream~! Why? Don't know~"

While holding in a laugh, Miu looked at the silhouette of her sister's back as she continued to dance.

From the moment that Hina walked out of the house, she was in quite an excited state, and of course, both the lyrics and the melody were a Hina original.

As singing was a sign that her sister was happy, when she thought that bringing Hina out was correct, it made Miu heave a sigh of relief in her heart. As for the squabbling duo, Miu thought that it would be fine just to leave them be.

Despite the fact that Yuuta looked somewhat unreliable, he still tried hard to be a responsible guardian. As for her sister, she just couldn't be express her feelings honestly. Anyway, they would probably be in despair at home because they made Hina cry.

"Hina, do you still want ice cream even though it's so cold?"

“Hina isn’t cold! No problem! Let’s eat a biiii~g ice cream at the rooftop of the supermarket! The ones that come out when we twist it!”

After saying that, Hina happily raised her chest.

Because of the determination of her cute little sister, the big sister did not have any reason for not going along with her.

“But Hina, that’s not ice cream, but soft cream.”

“Soft creem? That isn’t cold?”

“Not really, it’s actually quite cold, but……”

Explaining the difference between ice cream and soft cream wasn’t easy, and in any case, eating ice cream while being exposed to the cold wind of the winter on the rooftop was an enormous challenge for Miu.

Sora-chan and I took out the container from the fridge.

After that, we carefully opened the lid.

“Ah…… It’s probably unusable now.”

Although it was kept in the fridge, a few months had already passed.

The color of its contents had already changed, and the oil had already separated from it, so it didn’t look like it was edible at all.

“But…… This was made by Yuri-san, right?”

Sora-chan looked at the container with a convoluted expression on her face.

“…… The thing that can make Hina the happiest would definitely be Yuri-san’s cooking.”

That’s right. The fact that the tomato sauce would appear at such a time felt like it was a present left by Nee-san. However, would defrosting this to eat really be fine?

Even though there was a change for it to be the best Christmas present……

“Not only was Yuri-san good at making hamburger steak, her skills of making tomato sauce was excellent as well.”

“Mnn…… But when we lived together, I almost never helped out at all, so I don’t know how to make it. When I cooked by myself, I just cooked stuff that would be done just by frying them.”

“Me too…… To be precise, Yuri-san was afraid that it would be dangerous for me to cook, so she didn’t let me cook at all……”

If so, Sora-chan was probably quite clumsy when she cooked before this as well. People really can’t be judged by their looks.

To dissolve the heavy atmosphere, I decided to voice out a constructive suggestion.

“Let’s cut out a small piece to defrost and try its flavor. It might still be edible.”

“Mnn.”

With our quarrel forgotten, we came to a consensus. Perhaps we could still have a chance to taste Nee-san’s cooking after such a long time.

There was a sea of people before the west exit of the Ikebukuro station in the holidays.

There were parents leading their children, lovers, and even foreigners. Seeing such a scene would make people understand why it was the second most crowded station in Tokyo.

“You definitely can’t let go.”

“Mnn.”

Naturally, there is no reason why a young beauty with blonde hair holding the hand of a female toddler wouldn’t attract the gazes of the crowd.

Many of the pedestrians that passed by turned around for a second look. As Miu had long gotten used to such gazes, she wouldn’t particularly mind the gazes, while Hina hadn’t yet reached the age of minding the gazes of other people.

Besides, Miu was very clear of the fact that having striking features would allow her to keep a distance with other people instead, not to mention that a three year old girl was tagging along as well. With common sense, the thought that their parents or the guardian was nearby would arise in people’s hearts.

However, there are people without common sense as well.

“Can I take some of your time?”

The person who approached them with a broad smile was a suited man that was rather plump. Seeing his flashy tie and his long hair that had on a lot of hair wax, even Miu could see that he was a person with a suspicious occupation.

“I’m working in the showbiz.”

Without further ado, he handed Miu his card.

“I’m not interested in such a thing.”

While Miu refused with a radiant smile.

However, the suited man still persisted, following Miu wherever she went and pleaded repeatedly.

“I’m really not a suspicious person! Just listen to me for a bit! I’ll treat you to something at the coffee shop over there! Ah, of course, I’ll treat this child as well, okay?”

Although it was not the first time Miu met a star scout, one who was persistent to this extent was quite rare.

“No, I’d be trouble.”

“Then, then, can you introduce me to your parents! You can definitely become an idol!”

Even though ignorance is bliss, the insensitive man still touched on a topic that Miu was sensitive of, while Hina hid behind Miu with a scared expression as well. It wouldn’t matter if she was alone, but she even dared to scare Hina, absolutely unforgivable, let’s just scream— Just when Miu decided on that and was breathing in……

“Oi! Ossan!”

A boy stood between the man and the girls, as though he wanted to protect Miu and Hina.

The person that appeared before her eyes was one that Miu once saw.

He was Sora’s classmate that was in the same class as her sister, and once visited her sister as well.

His name is…… Miu couldn’t remember.

“You’re scaring the kid!”

Although the words weren't too loud, it could be heard exceptionally clear. The boy completely ignored the difference between the height of an adult and a middle schooler, unblinkingly glaring at the man.

Even though his features still had a trace of youth, the boy's attitude was rather firm, and the imposing manner almost covered the opposing party as well.

"W- What do you mean by that?"

"She already refused, so just give up already!"

This time, the boy spoke in a rather loud voice, causing the people nearby to unconsciously stop their footsteps, turning around to look at them.

The holiday crowd stopped in an instant at that small place. Probably because he was afraid of other people's notice, the fat man wailed and ran away in a hurry.

"Oi! Are you okay?"

"T- Thank you……"

"Don't worry about it. Isn't helping people out when they're in trouble the right thing to do?"

Daiki rubbed the bottom of his nose triumphantly, while a bespectacled good-looking teen walked over from behind him.

"Daiki, though nothing happened this time, don't take action without checking on the situation next time. If they're actually just lovers or parent and child in an argument, what are you planning to do?"

"If so…… Just apologize!"

"It's just because of that that I……"

After she heard their conversation, Miu finally remembered the name of the boy.

“That’s right…… You’re Maeshima-san, right?”

“Eh? D- Do you know me!? S- Speaking of which, it seems like I saw you before as well…… Where was it?”

It was Daiki’s turn to be surprised. As Miu was never forgotten by anyone, it was a refreshing change for her. Actually forgetting her blonde hair, this person must be a complete airhead.

“Ah…… You’re Takanashi-san’s……”

Just at that moment, the bespectacled boy seemed to have recognized Miu.

“Shuuji, do you know her?”

“What are you talking about? Isn’t she Takanashi-san’s younger sister?”

“…… What!? W- When you mention is…… She does seem to have a blonde sister.”

Daiki suddenly got flustered and remembered.

“Seriously, there’s just Takanashi-san in your eyes.”

“S- Shut up! Shuuji!”

Even Miu could tell that the Takanashi-san that they spoke of was Sora.

“Nee-tan, who is this big brother? A bad person?”

Hina, who noticed that that she did not need to be scared anymore, poked her head out of Miu’s head and asked.

“Ah! It’s the Nii-tan who once carried Hina!”

Hina waved with a smile on her face, while Daiki seemed to have remembered Hina, with an expression of realization on his face.

"…… Um…… Thank you for helping us, Maeshima-san."

"Ah! It's nothing, really! Haha! Erm…… Y- Your sister always helped……"

In an instant, Daiki completely froze, and started to sweat bullets.

After all, the last time that they met was rather awkward. That time, Daiki was being scolded angrily by Sora, causing her to collapse of exhaustion. When Daiki was spacing out, he met Miu and Hina who just returned, and they went to the hospital together after that.

"I- It's nothing, it's great that I can be of help…… W- We were just buying stuff that we need for the Christmas concert, so…… S- See you later!"

Just when Daiki was at a loss of words and was planning to slip away……

The sleeve of his shirt was grabbed by Miu.

"I- Is there anything wrong?"

Facing Daiki, who cautiously turned out to ask, Miu showed him a radiant smile.

"You just mentioned a Christmas concert…… Right? Please elaborate for a bit."

Facing the striking beauty who was the younger sister of his crush at the same time, Daiki couldn't go against the smile before his eyes at all.

I never once before felt that the defrosting function of the microwave was slow like it is right now.

The kitchen in the Takanashi residence started to be filled with the smell of smoked tomatoes.

“Is it still okay?”

“…… I don’t know either.”

Facing Sora-chan’s question, I didn’t know what to answer at all.

The tomato sauce that was taken out of the microwave was completely black, and it didn’t smell that good either.

But even so……

Sora-chan and I mustered some courage, picked up a spoon and looked at each other.

“Have you prepared yourself, Onii-chan?”

“Nnn, anytime would be fine.”

At the same time the conversation ended, we scooped up some tomato sauce and fed it into our mouths.

On the instant when we sent the tomato sauce into our mouths with our eyes tightly closed…… We felt the fragrance of the tomatoes……

Even though that caused us to be able to swallow the tomato sauce naturally, what occurred next was just as you can expect.

As expected, it didn’t feel good at all. When I thought about it, there was a time when the house wasn’t taken care of by anyone at all, so after this thing was defrosted once, it was just kept in a corner of the fridge, and probably nobody noticed when we were tidying up as well.

This taste probably means that it had already spoiled. Thinking that Hina and Miu-chan hadn't found out about such a thing made me heave a sigh of relief.

"S- Sora-chan, it doesn't seem to be okay."

"Nnn, nnn, seems so……"

Sora-chan seemed to be slightly wiser than I, and she hastily spat out the tomato sauce that she hadn't swallowed yet on a piece of tissue.

"My apologies, allow me to use the restroom for a moment."

Just at that moment, I noticed the changes in my abdomen, and decided to succumb to the impulse of wanting to expel the foreign substances from my body.

However, Sora-chan grabbed my shirt, cold sweat on her face as well.

"Onii-chan…… Me too……"

"I- If so, then you go first. I'll use it after yo……"

"I- I- I- Idiot! Idiot Onii-chan! Go to a restroom at a convenience store!"

After getting a scolding from the red-faced Sora-chan, I rushed towards a convenience store while hugging my stomach.

The rooftop of the supermarket was more crowded than Miu had expected.

Even if it's the weekend, you don't need to come up to the rooftop just for the cold wind…… Though Miu had such a thought, the thoughts of the common man were really hard to grasp.

"There are more people here than expected."

The person that was her sister's classmate seemed to have the same thoughts as Miu, and he said while adjusting his glasses.

"Oi! It'll drop all over the floor if you eat like this! Ahh! See! You're getting it on your whole hand!"

After that, sounds of a commotion could be heard from the side as the person who spoke was busy dealing with the three year old toddler.

"Ah! Seriously! Give me the ice cream first! You hurry up and clean up your hand!"

"No! The ice cream is Hina's!"

"I'm not even snatching it from you!"

"No! Idiot Daiki!"

"Don't call me an idiot! And also, don't call my name directly!"

Miu looked at her little sister whose lips were smeared with ice cream and her elder sister's classmate who was busy taking care of Hina.

It was somewhat unexpected for Miu, as Hina was unexpectedly affectionate to Daiki.

It was even more unexpected for her that Daiki, whom she thought was a rough person who doesn't think before he talks, was so good at taking care of other people.

"Are you surprised?"

Shuuji suddenly spoke at that moment.

"Daiki has a lot of siblings at home, and since that guy is the eldest son, he has to take care of his younger brothers. Anyway, it's because of this that he's so good at handling children."

So that's why. Even though she didn't particularly request for his help, he was concerned about Hina. When the food that Hina was eating dropped out, he would immediately take out his handkerchief or a tissue to wipe it clean for Hina. So it's because of this. Daiki didn't even look like the type of person who would keep handkerchiefs by his side. That made Miu reconsider her opinion about him.

When she thought about it, after accepting his help, she even allowed him to treat them to ice cream, so it might be slightly too much.

"Hina, is it good?"

"Nnn!"

"Well then, remember to say thank you to the onii-chan that treated you to it."

"Daiki! Tank you!"

"Don't mention it. And also, I'm telling you not to call me by my name!"

Although his tone was somewhat rough, he was not angry. It seemed like Hina liked Daiki quite a lot as well, and unhesitatingly asking him to play with her.

"That's right, what kind of activity is the Christmas performance that you spoke of?"

Miu asked Shuuji while watching Hina play happily with Daiki. Shuuji, whose steady attitude was completely different from Daiki's personality, gave a faintly wry smile.

"Hmm, if Takanashi-san didn't tell you about this, I'm not sure if I should tell you about this as well."

Despite the fact that he started with those words, Shuuji still roughly explained about the Christmas concert of the Choir Club, and the fact that Sora was given a solo part.

“Eh! Though there’s something so interesting, Onee-chan never told us about this at all!”

“She’s probably shy. Even though our club president said that she wouldn’t be nervous if only her family members would go, I think the situation will be the exact opposite of that. Although Buchou isn’t bad, she’s a bit eccentric.”

Shuuji explained with a wry smile, but Miu imagined Sora’s face while bearing the attitude of having some reservations about it.

Perhaps the club president was right. After all, Sora has an uchibenkei personality of being ‘a lion at home, a mouse abroad’, and she does seem to be stronger when being with her family as well.

It is unknown whether this is because of her responsibility as the eldest sister or the belief that she is loved by her family.

“However, since Takanashi didn’t tell this to her family, if she knows that we’re the ones that spoke of this, wouldn’t she be angry? I- If so, I’ll be somewhat troubled.”

Daiki, who was playing with Hina at a side, spoke in a sincere manner after hearing the two’s discussion.

“Hmm~ That may be so.”

The sharp Miu had already perceived the fact that Daiki had a crush on Sora from their previous conversations.

However, just because Miu understood that Sora already had someone in her heart, Sora could only smile wryly when speaking of the person called Daiki.

If Miu told Daiki that Sora and Yuuta were having fun in the kitchen, he would probably have a severe blow.

Even so, Miu did not plan to allow the person who saved her to suffer any blow, so she didn't mention it.

Instead, Miu spoke with a smile:

"Well then, I'll keep it a secret, so…… Are you willing to accompany us for shopping after this?"

"That's fine! Daiki, let's go!"

Facing the girl whose appearance rivals that of an idol and the smile of an adorable toddler, the two middle school boys weren't in any place to resist at all.

Sora-chan looked quite gaunt.

"Sigh……"

Sora-chan and I had used up all of our energy, and were lying on the sofa in exhaustion.

A period of time had passed since the commotion of the tomato sauce.

Although the toilet war ended in a short time, our battle returned to its original point after that.

The tomato sauce that Nee-san made had already spoiled, but we, who couldn't bear to throw it away, changed the date to a piece of sticker with

‘Do Not Eat’ written on it, and placed the container back in the fridge. In any case, let’s keep it there as a protective talisman.

And the plan of using the sauce that Nee-san left to make dishes came to failure just like that.

After that, Sora-chan and I started our battle yet again.

Even though we decided to ‘try making it by ourselves’—

The character bento that I made didn’t look like a panda at all, and looked like a modernistic piece of art made by a drunk, while Sora-chan’s self-made noodles couldn’t be successfully made into noodles no matter what she did, and even the trial of cooperation ended in failure—

In the end, just saying ‘Let me do it!’ just couldn’t fill up a lunch box container at all.

The bento container for children that was a mere ten cubic centimeters was actually vast like the universe, causing our heads to spin spectacularly.

“Other people…… Have to do this every day?”

Sora-chan’s words were the same as I thought.

The experiences these few months made me think that I learnt quite a lot, however…… Using the hamburger steak as an example, even though Sora-chan and I learnt how to make it, it doesn’t appear to be good as well.

Although we can learn how to cook vegetables and dishes that can be completed by cutting, frying and stewing with soy sauce, when I thought about it, we never learnt the basics properly at all.

If I knew it would turn out like that, I should have helped Nee-san to cook more in the first place.

Looking at the kitchen that looked as though a typhoon passed by it, I heaved a huge sigh with my whole body.

Just at that moment……

“What is wrong with this sorry state?”

It was an unbearably calm voice that did not contain anger or surprise.

They were just words sternly stating the truth.

“Ehh!?”

Sora-chan and I sprang up at the same time.

We, who rose from the sofa, saw that Oba-san was standing before our eyes.

There was a smile on Oba-san’s face, but her gaze did not contain any trace of a smile at all.

“I can tell that you are cooking, but…… What is wrong with this? Turning it into this state, absolutely nothing can be done, isn’t that right?”

Oba-san said while gazing at the ingredients and failed works messily placed in the kitchen.

“T- T- That’s not it, this is actually……”

“W- We’re…… just planning to clean up!”

“Is that so?”

Oba-san breathed in deeply.

“Then clean it up immediately! I’ll help out as well!”

“Yes, yes!!!”

We speeded up as though we were whipped.

O- Oba-san…… She didn't set up surveillance cameras in the house, did she……?

However, she did not continue to berate us, and wore an expression as though she was thinking of something.

For quite some time, we cleaned up the mess without speaking in the kitchen.

Not long after, the kitchen turned even cleaner than before we started to cook.

When we completely cleaned the dust and oil behind the stove, Oba-san spoke in satisfaction:

"Good work, Yuuta-san, Sora-san."

As for us, we didn't even have the energy to reply.

Since it was our fault for making a mess in the kitchen, you can say that we brought it on ourselves.

That moment, Oba-san was sitting gracefully in the living room while making tea for us.

Although it was the same old sencha, for some reason, Oba-san's tea was exceptionally smooth.

In the end, everything depends on skill and experience.

And at that moment, not only was Oba-san not angry, she said to us in a slightly apologetic tone instead:

“Yuuta-san, I was thinking about this from before…… Do you have any experience of cooking? You always lived alone ever since you separated from Yuri-san, so you probably have some experience, right?”

“W- Well, actually…… I almost never cooked myself.”

To be frank, I only noticed in the war before this, about the dishes that can be handled by using a frying pan to cook vegetables and meat, if the changes in ingredients and sauce weren’t counted, the recipes that I know of probably doesn’t even reach twenty.

“Then Sora-san, have you any experience of helping to cook?”

“Sorry…… I’m rather clumsy, so even Miu might have even more experience of cooking that I had……”

After we said that, Oba-san heaved a long sigh.

“Sorry, about the matters of cooking, I’m actually responsible as well.”

“Oba-san……?”

“I should have noticed this earlier. I’ve reaffirmed your refrigerator just now. As I saw that the dishes that you make are not bad at times, I was mistaken that even though you pass your days somewhat sloppily, you still know how to cook.”

Ahhh. Oba-san was probably referring to Raika-san and Nimura’s cooking. Mrs. Kitahara was concerned of us as well, and often sends us some cooking, and we would look through cookbooks when we were free as well, and occasionally make some nice dishes.

Well, though the percentage of success was about 30%. Even if it ended in failure, we wouldn’t keep it in the fridge as well, so Oba-san naturally didn’t have any chance of seeing those failures, and I didn’t think Oba-san had any reason to reproach herself because of this.

“I shall come here more often after this to cook some vegetables and the like for you to keep. Judging from the situation, it seems like you need a bento more right now. It there anything wrong with Hina’s kindergarten again?”

Seeing Oba-san dully expressing her thoughts, Sora-chan seemed to have something to say.

“E- Excuse me…….!”

On the next instant, Sora-chan stood up all of a sudden, and spoke as though she had come to a resolution:

“Please teach me how to cook!”

“To cook, huh? You don’t need to be so anxious about such a thing, and besides, you have to focus on your studi……”

“I will try hard to learn! That’s why, please teach me!”

As though she was breaking Oba-san’s kind words, Sora-chan lowered her head and pleaded so.

“Me too! Oba-san, please teach me!”

I pleaded with my head lowered like Sora-chan as well.

Compared with information obtained from books or the net, learning from people is indeed better. To make Hina happy, Sora-chan and I were both serious.

“…… Very well then. I will teach you, so raise your heads.”

Although she hesitated at first, Oba-san gave up not long after that and promised to teach us.

“Okay! If so, the bento is settled then. Sora-chan, relax and allow me…….”

“What are you talking about, Onii-chan? Aren’t you supposed to finish your reports!? Allow me to make Hina’s bento!”

After gaining an indescribably large help, Sora-chan and my spirits burned once more.

“Oba-san! If so, from tomorrow on……”

“What are you talking about?”

Oba-san interjected.

“There is much for you to learn, so the thought of starting from tomorrow is too leisurely. We’re starting right now.”

Oba-san’s stern manner caused Sora-chan and I to shudder. Uh oh. When she gets into the mood, Oba-san is invincible.

“Stop dillydallying. We’re starting immediately. I’ll help handle the dinner tonight.”

“Aye, aye!”

We hurriedly ran towards the kitchen. Naturally, Oba-san stood at the very center, while Sora-chan and I stood at her sides.

“First up is Sora-san.”

“Yes!”

“Start from peeling the carrot skin.”

“Eh? But, I……”

Probably remembering her previously failed attempt of peeling the carrot, causing it to turn into pieces, Sora-chan seemed rather hesitant.

“I will teach you the technique. First, hold the peeling knife. Don’t use too much force, and don’t cut in too deeply, just lightly pull it down. Leaving a little bit of the skin is fine as well.”

“O- Okay.”

While looking tense, Sora-chan started to peel the skin.

“Yuuta-san, don’t space out there as well. After the water boils, throw in a pinch of salt.”

“A pinch of salt…… How much is that?”

“A pinch is a pinch! An amount that is naturally pinched!”

“Okay!”

“Pfft! You’re got scolded.”

Sora-chan spoke in a voice that only I could hear.

“Stop fussing. If you don’t hurry up, it’ll be dark soon. I definitely won’t yield when it comes to Hina’s bento.”

“Uuu~……”

Sparks flew between the two of us once more, while Oba-san stopped us with a rare wry smile on her face.

“What are you mumbling about? Sora-san, please hurry up, and Yuuta-san, don’t stay idle as well! Pour in some oil after heating up the frying pan. Sigh…… This is indeed a large mistake of mine. These times, we’re preparing healthy meals for you to have a balanced diet!”

Oba-san raised her index finger after saying that.

“If your capabilities fail to reach a certain level, I shall make Hina-san’s bento instead! I will do as I said, so take note of that!”

“ “Understood!” “

W- Why does she feel like Nee-san?

The vigor and determination is really similar. Sora-chan seemed to have the same thoughts as well, and turned around to look at me. After we looked at each other for a moment, we looked away with force again, and continued our work while facing opposite directions.

As Papa, regarding Hina’s bento, I will never yield no matter what.

The extent of Oba-san’s sternness was more than we expected. Did we choose the wrong teacher?

She carefully taught us the basics of cooking. When I think about it, the cookbooks usually write terms like ‘a suitable amount of’ and so on, and wasn’t practical at all, but I finally understood why it was written like that in the books.

Looking at Oba-san unhesitatingly gauge the amount with her eyes and her fluid actions, it really wasn’t something that could be recreated with the steps and descriptions in books.

However, as Oba-san’s movements were too quick, it was already hard for us to keep up with her pace, and her unusually calm demeanor caused us to

be so tense that we were short of breath as well. And we would be sternly scolded at times as well……

It seemed like learning to cook from Oba-san might be too high a starting point for us……

Just like that, when I started to doubt my choices……

Ding dong!

The electric doorbell at the entrance rang.

“Have Miu-chan and Hina returned……?”

“If it’s them, they don’t need to press the doorbell, do they?”

Ding dong!

The doorbell rang again.

The visitor was quite impatient.

Ding dong ding dong ding dong!

This time, it was a continuous streak.

This can’t be said as impatient anymore, but looking for trouble.

“Who is doing this prank? I shall take a look.”

Just when we were busy…… At the same time that I complained in my heart, I felt relieved for being able to escape from the tense situation before my eyes.

“I- I’ll go as well!”

Maybe because she had the same thoughts as I, Sora-chan followed us as well.

While Oba-san might have realized that we were already at our limits, so she just shrugged slightly and didn't say anything anymore.

After I sighed in relief, I opened the door.

Well then, who on earth is the rude visitor……. Eh?

"Good afternoo~n, Segawa-chan."

"Good afternoon."

The ones who appeared before my eyes in turn were the members of Roary.

"Nimura! Raika-san as well……!?"

Apart from that—

"Segawa-ku~n! I'm here to look for you…… Heh ☆"

Sako-senpai spoke while making a cute pose.

When Miu and Hina returned, it had already turned completely dark.

Although it's a season when the sun sets quicker, staying out too late isn't good as well.

And she didn't know when her classmates would see her as well. It was just because Miu was a popular person that the blows that she would take were more vigorous when her small mistakes were caught. In addition, she was with a male older than her that day as well.

"Well then, we'll just send you here."

"Eh? You can meet Onee-chan and Oji-san first……"

"That's fine, no need, goodbye."

After saying that, Daiki and Shuuji, who played the role of an errand boy and a bodyguard, handed the items in their hands to Miu. Hina took the toys that they bought when they shopped at the aquarium near the shopping center, and looked extremely happy.

“Hina, see you again.”

Daiki somewhat roughly stroked Hina’s head.

“Nnn! Daiki, take care as well!”

The two who noticed that Hina’s manner of speaking was affected by the two middle school boys, left after a wry smile.

“Hina, they’re actually quite nice, though somewhat impulsive.”

“Daiki and Shuuji are fun.”

“Is that so. Hina, Daiki-san and Shuuji-san asked us not to tell them about the Christmas performance. Understand? No matter it’s Oji-san or Onee-chan, you can’t tell.”

“Okay! Hina will keep it a secret!”

With a broad smile on her face, Hina answered unhesitatingly. After that, Miu led Hina to the entrance while holding hands.

“We’re back!”

“Back~”

Miu opened the front door while saying cheerily.

“What were you thinking!!”

Just at that moment, an angry roar suddenly came from the house, giving both Hina and Miu a huge fright, and they froze on the spot.

After they glanced at each other, they cautiously walked towards the living room.

There, they saw Sako-senpai, who was kneeling on the floor while being scolded by their aunt.

“If you keep being so careless with your life, you will definitely regret it in your future! Besides, not graduating from college is a complete waste of money! Facing your parents who paid for the fees for you and the lecturers who taught you, won’t you feel ashamed!?”

“Y- Yes, sorry, I will repent on it!”

That Sako-senpai cowered when he faced Oba-san’s scolding.

It was the first time Miu saw Oba-san, who treated people sternly, but wouldn’t usually get so emotional like that. Although Miu wasn’t sure why Oba-san was so angry, since her target was the club president, there were quite a lot of things for her to be scornful of……

“Miu! Hina! Why did you return so late!”

“Onee-chan…… What’s with this situation?”

Miu asked her sister who was tightly embracing them.

“Anyway, it’s about time for someone to give him a scolding as well.”

“Oi-tan! Hina is back!”

“Oh! Welcome home, Hina. You were out so late, Oi-tan was really worried.”

Yuuta hugged Hina, who ran towards him.

“Where did you go to play today?”

“To see sunish!”

“S- Sunish?”

“We went to the aquarium.”

“Oh! So it’s a sunfish.”

“The sunish were so big! But, but, it’ll become like this when you look from the front!”

Hina used her hands to squeeze her cheeks, and seemed that she wanted to show the flat appearance of a sunfish.

“Hina-chan, welcome home.”

“Ah! It’s Raika Nee-tan. Raika Nee-tan is here to play?”

“That’s right, because I wanted to see Hina.”

Although Raika was still wearing a poker face, she gave people a faint feeling that there was a trace of smile on her face.

“Sorry for this. Although it’s the rare Sunday, so many people came over, but we were actually planning to give up on it. It’s because Sako-senpai wanted to come over no matter what.”

“Oi! Nimura-kun! Isn’t that too devious! Didn’t you agree to that as well!”

“I haven’t finished yet!”

“Uwaa! Sorry!”

“Pfft…… Hehe……. Ahahaha!”

Before Miu noticed, she already started to laugh out loud.

Seeing that Yuuta and her sister seemed to have made peace, and the cheery friends and family by her side, it made Miu feel rather happy.

Just like that, there were quite a lot of people eating at our place that day. The stewed potato and meat that Oba-san almost single-handedly made was slightly too sweet to me. Sako-senpai kept getting scolded by Oba-san even when he was eating.

After dinner ended, it felt like Sako-senpai looked rather gaunt……

In any case, Oba-san would teach us how to cook every three days.

Although it was quite close to Christmas, to make Hina happy, we must do our best. Just like that, the rather unique group of friends and family passed the Sunday night at home.

“Oh! So this is how Sora-chan looks in a kimono…… Indeed, cute people look good in anything.”

Nimura praised deliberately while flipping through the photo album.

And each time she was praised, Sora-chan responded with “Not really……”, “Thank you……” and the like, and although her whole face was red, she looked quite happy as well. For some reason, I didn’t feel really happy for that.

“You look good in a kimono……. I’m so envious.”

Raika-san looked at her breasts and said in a low voice.

“Having breasts as big as Raika-san, wearing a kimono is probably quite troublesome.”

“Yes, it’s troublesome. I must tie a bath towel on my waist……”

Raika-san lowered her head slightly crestfallen.

But if possible, I wish that she wouldn't hold her breasts at this time.

I was quite happy when I saw that, but when everyone was present, it wouldn't be nice if people saw it. As Sako-senpai took out the photos that he took during Shichi-Go-San, it turned into a photo viewing party unknowingly. As Oba-san left ages ago since she had something else to do, there weren't anyone to stop Sako-senpai anymore.

"A suggestion! I wish to see Miu-sama's photos!"

Sako-senpai immediately started to lose control.

"Ahh~ Miu-sama's Shichi-Go-San…… Just imagining it can increase one's age!"

Although I couldn't understand senpai's logic at all, it was clear that he was anticipating it quite a lot.

However, the wish was probably……

"What a pity, there aren't any photos of my Shichi-Go-San at all."

"Wha……!?"

I suddenly recalled the matter that I realized some before this— the fact that there were obviously less photos of Miu-chan when she was younger for some reason, while even the three year old Hina had enough photos to fill up a whole photo album.

Furthermore, there wasn't even one photo of Miu-chan's three year old Shichi-Go-San.

I couldn't ask the reason, but I understood that there must be a certain reason for that.

“How can this be…… Then what should I use for me to go on living……”

Sako-senpai kneeled on the floor in despair. Um…… Do you need to exaggerate so much……

“It’s almost time for the last train.”

Raika-senpai spoke with her hand on Sako-senpai’s shoulders.

“No, no! I don’t wanna go! I still wanna play with Segawa-kun!”

“Are you a child……”

“That’s right, senpai, you’ve forgotten the reason that we came here for. Aren’t we going to discuss the party on Christmas eve?”

Just when I was thinking of how to chase Sako-senpai away, the words suddenly popped out of Nimura’s mouth. A party on Christmas eve?

“Oh! That’s right! I’ve forgotten about this important matter! I’m here today to invite you!”

“We didn’t make a celebration party for the school festival, right? I think that it’s a great opportunity.”

“Party! It seems to be nice!”

Miu-chan immediately expressed her approval.

“I want to join the Christmas party, with Hina-chan and the others.”

Raika-san, who still maintained her poker face, said so with her face very close to me.

“Hina wants a party! Party!”

“B- But, the Christmas party at Hina’s kindergarten……”

“The Christmas party probably ends in the evening, right? And our party starts at night.”

“Uuu…… W- Well then, at least don’t choose it on Christmas eve, but on another day……”

For some reason, Sora-chan didn’t seem willing at all.

“Onee-chan, what’s wrong? Is there anything else on Christmas eve…… Ah! Is it possible……”

Christmas eve…… Is there something else? Perhaps……

“Sora-chan! What’s with this!? I, as your guardian, the person standing in as a father, don’t approve of middle school students having a relationship!”

Only this thing, I must clearly make my stand!

“No! No! That’s not it!”

“Then what!?”

“That’s not important! Raika-san, must it be on Christmas eve? Isn’t it fine on Christmas night?”

“It’s fine with me, but why?”

When the Raika-san asked with a poker face, Sora-chan couldn’t answer at all, and that intensified my suspicions.

“I- I- Is it possible…… Is it possible that you’re going out with that arrogant Maeshima last time……”

“O- Of course not! Don’t imagine all this just because it’s Christmas! Idiot Onii-chan!”

Just when Sora-chan denied it with her whole face red, the answer appeared from an unexpected source.

“Ah! The performance! Performa~nce, performa~nce ♪”

Hina knows! While making an expression like that, she started to sing a song with the theme of ‘performance’.

“Hina, what does that mean?”

“Christmas performance, we have to keep secwet ♪ Secwet…… What’s a secwet?”

There were questions on Hina’s cute face, while a trace of a smile shone in the pair of large, innocent eyes.

“Christmas…… Performance?”

“W- Wait a minute! Hina! Why do you know!?”

My question overlapped with Sora-chan’s inquiry on Hina, while that confirmed the truth as well.

“Whoops…… So sorry, Maeshima-san. Perhaps I should have told Hina in another way……”

Miu-chan said in a daze, but it was already too late.

“Miu-chan, what is this?”

She seemed to have given up on hiding it, and spoke to us about the matters that occureed. When I heard about Maeshima-kun helping Miu-chan and Hina, it caused the thought of being able to forgive his numerous rude behaviors in the past to arise in my heart, but Sora-chan seemed quite displeased.

“Seriously! Just helping is fine, but why did they say all that to Miu!”

“Because they met us just when they were buying stuff for the performance. That couldn’t be helped, right?”

“But……”

Sora-chan still seemed to be rather doubtful. Hmm, Maeshima-kun, it seems like points have been deducted from your love. That’s good. Please continue to gain negative points.

Just when I was having such childish thoughts, Sora-chan gave a large sigh as though she already given up.

“It’s like this, I will be very busy on Christmas eve, sorry.”

“Wait a minute, Sora-kun, the time for the performance is……?”

Sako-senpai asked with a solemn expression that I never saw before.

“As I recall…… It starts from five…… Until Eight or so.”

“That isn’t a problem at all!”

Sako-senpai happily raised his fist, standing up in agitation.

“I hereby speak of the plan for the Christmas party! First, joining the Christmas party at the kindergarten in the morning! After that, watching the performance of the Choir Club, and then it’s ‘Let’s Party Time’ until the morning!”

“You mean that everyone here is going to see the performance!? I don’t want to!”

“Sora-chan, I’ve already decided!”

“You shut up! You definitely can’t come! If you go, I absolutely won’t forgive you for that!”

“Ufufu……”

“Stop laughing in such a disgusting way!”

The first Christmas that I went through when I became a Papa already had a hint of confusion early on.

And apart from this, there was a large problem as well.

Along with Christmas, the thing other than the party would be presents!

Uh oh, I actually forgot about such an important thing.

Even if I gave them things that they don’t like, my kind nieces would probably pretend to be happy. As their guardian, naturally I can’t allow them to suffer such a thing. That’s what I thought.

I have to think of a present that can make them happy…….!

Apart from that, since our money is used together, they probably won’t be happy if I gave them something expensive.

It’s really hard to choose.

In any case, I can only thank Sako-senpai and the others for making me remember this.

And also…… As for the Raika-san that I love, I have to think of something to give her as well. Nimura, who always took care of me, I have to give him something in return as well. As for Sako-senpai…… Probably allowing him to take one photo of Miu-chan would be fine. When I started to think of it, I realized that it was quite a hectic matter.

Just like that, we started the hectic December.

Chapter 4 – Dishes, Emotions, Passing By

“Doesn’t Raika-chan ever smile?”

It was something that occurred in primary school, the girl who sat in front turned around and inquired to Raika.

At first, Raika was not sure how to respond, so she just awaited the answer of the other party with her head slightly tilted.

However, the girl did not give Raika the response that she was anticipating. Not only that, she was even told the extremely cruel statement of ‘Raika-chan is so scary, I don’t like to be with her’.

However, whenever she encounters such undisguised words exclusive to children, Raika would not feel particularly hurt, but just accepted the situation indifferently. She developed the habit of reflecting on things in order from the time she was little. Hence, she was rather bad at dealing with unexpected things. There were many times when Raika would just be blankly rooted to the spot, sinking in deep thought alone.

For instance, when she saw her friend trip and cry, Raika would think:

Why is she crying? Because it hurts. It hurts because of the injury. The flowing blood is more than expected. It might not actually hurt that much at all. Perhaps she was frightened to tears as she saw herself bleeding so much. Speaking of which, teacher said that if a wound is dirtied, germs would get in from there. The so-called germs is just a common name, in truth, the term includes harmful bacteria, microorganisms and viruses. That’s what the books say.

When harmful substances enter the body, humans will get sick, and it might cause death in the worst situation. That’s what the books say as well. As she continues to cry, what will I feel if she falls sick or dies before my eyes? I never experienced such a thing, so I’m not sure.

That's right, if I'm hurt as well, what would I do? …… I would probably stand up, clean the wound, and look for a teacher to help disinfect it. If so, why does she continue to cry, and isn't doing such a thing? Don't know, incomprehensible.

The mind of the young Raika was full of such thoughts.

Thus, when she realized that she does not smile, she frantically thought of a reason as well.

It was definitely not because she was unhappy, or she did not have any emotions as well.

When she ate sweet food, she would think that it was tasty, and would sometimes feel like eating some more as well. When she watched sad movies, she would reflect her emotions on the main character as well. However, she just did not know how to smile. It might have been a knotty problem.

And to Raika, this matter turned into an unseen worry in her heart.

After that, Raika entered college.

Although the teachers recommended her to target colleges higher in the ranking, Raika chose Tama Literary College that was closer to her house in the end. That was because she felt that the time used up to go to school and to hang out outside alone was quite meaningless.

Additionally, to Raika, she had to solve a problem more pressing to her compared with homework and jobs.

— Why do humans smile?

It was an incomprehensible question.

Can she really find the answer?

Raika, who entered the college campus in uneasiness and anticipation, felt disappointed immediately.

The numerous men surrounding her.

The invitations for dates without exception.

Parties, gatherings, clubs.

Raika once thought that she would be able to meet many different types of people after becoming a free college student with various choices, leaving her high school life that was bound with numerous schedules, but in truth, no matter who approached her, all of them would only say similar things.

At first, Raika tried to accept the invitations, but it was similar each time.

Among them, what disappointed Raika the most was the students' smiles.

The appearance of them forcing out a smiling face even though they didn't feel happy or interested at all made Raika feel so disgusted that she couldn't bear it.

Very soon, Raika started to refuse invitations from the others, as she already understood that there weren't anything that could interest her anymore. But even so, there were still many men approaching Raika.

Furthermore, they weren't limited to her college, but even men from other schools.

Judging from the objective facts and the responses of the others, Raika understood that her appearance could be said to be quite striking even when one speaks in a more conservative way. She understood as well that it was even easier for her breasts that underwent rapid growth from the spring when she was fifteen to become the center of attention.

However, Raika did not think that she would be in the spotlight until this extent. Even though she thought that such a situation would be resolved in due time, it wasn't as successful as she expected. Just when Raika gradually felt tired of her college life, a strange thing occurred.

During lunch break one day, unusually, Raika was alone in the canteen for students.

Usually, there would be men that she did not know their names of gathered by her side, bluffing about boring subjects, but there wasn't even one that day. Raika felt mystified by that, and when she was sinking into deep thought because of that, she noticed a fat, bespectacled man sitting on the same table as her, wolfing down his curry pork chop rice.

That person was Sako Shuntarou.

After noticing Raika's gaze, Sako shouted: "I won't give you any!", and he covered the countless dishes before him as though he was guarding them. It seemed like the reason for the troublesome men's absence was because of this man.

Apart from that, the fact that Raika found rare was that the gazes that those men usually give her did not appear on the man before her.

"Excuse me, can you help pass the tomato sauce, Oda Raika-kun?"

Just when Raika was pondering about such matters, he suddenly spoke to her, making her realize that he was unhesitatingly looking at her. Thus, Raika passed the tomato sauce to him.

"Do you know me?"

"Well, I heard that you're the female who is the most troubled of her aching shoulders."

"Sexual harassment."

After hearing that, a somewhat triumphant surfaced on the fat man's oily face.

"But you won't mind that, right? Cold beauty."

That person was right. That made Raika interested in the fat man before her eyes, while a thought surfaced in her mind at the same time: if she became friends with that man, other men might not trouble her anymore.

Just like that, Sako Shuntarou and Oda Raika met each other, while the Road Observation Research Society was born as well.

The contents of their activities were to 'observe humans', and that included the question that Raika kept having— Why do humans smile?

The club was formed just to locate the answer of these questions.

"It feels like…… I'm being stared at."

I, who was walking in the campus, kept feeling stares of people on me.

At first, I was thinking that it was just my imagination, but it didn't seem to be so.

When a group chatting on a bench saw me approaching from the entrance, they very obviously changed topics, while the students who passed by my side turned around for a look without exception. Even a couple that I just met turned back especially to check me out.

What's wrong with this?

There was a reasonable question in my mind, and at the same time, I immediately thought of a few possibilities.

Firstly, the situation with the highest possibility, Sako-senpai did something yet again. Even though I wasn't willing to think so, a certain action that caused my appearance and name to be spread through the whole school might have already happened.

The next possibility that I thought of would probably be Raika-san.

As you can see, I am in the same club as a striking beauty, and can chat with her as I like. This can definitely arouse attention. There might already be rumors…… Like we're dating, for instance…… regarding Raika-san and I.

If that were to be so, it won't be so bad to be noticed by the others, and besides, there's the possibility of turning this into a fact as well, as the situation of a pure rumor unknowingly turning into reality might happen as well.

…… Probably. In any case, I was so optimistic that morning that such a thought surfaced, and I excitedly headed towards the teacher's office to hand in my report.

"Phew…… It's finally over!"

Thus, almost all of my reports were handed in.

What's left was to pray that the lecturers teaching various subjects would be willing to stamp down the seal of 'Fine, I'll give you the credits' after reading my reports. In any case, I will only find out the results after New Year.

Leaving the teacher's office, I walked leisurely in the campus.

Just like before, I could still feel stares on me, but fortunately, it was the time for make up classes, so there weren't too many students, so I wasn't too mindful of them, however…… In truth, the so-called make up classes were just classes to make up for the teaching days for reasons like 'to allow

lecturers to arrange for classes more easily’. Do you understand an explanation like this?

In simpler terms, most of the make up classes would be squeezed in the winter break.

As my aim had already been achieved, I was starting to think of going home just like that or to fill my stomach by buying a cheap lunch at the canteen. Just at that moment, I suddenly felt a bone-chilling cold.

Or should I say that it was an exceptionally sharp gaze? In any case, it felt quite unusual.

On the pavement where almost no one was walking on, I looked around, searching for the source of the gaze.

“Ah…… Found it.”

That person was hiding behind the automatic vendor by the canteen. There was a rubbish bin exclusively for empty cans, and Raika-san was just squatting there, holding the cover of a rubbish bin from goodness knows where while staring unblinkingly at me through the round hole that one throws rubbish through.

I think about it every time, it’s really hard for one to distinguish if Raika-san disguises herself seriously or jokingly.

I really wished that there is a benchmark for me to choose if I should do a tsukkomi on her, or to pretend to fall for her disguise.

In any case, there wasn’t a choice for me to ignore her in my heart.

“Err…… Raika-san, what are you doing here?”

“……”

Raika-san did not reply. So does that mean that she's actually seriously trying to hide?

If so, I would have to think of something to deal with this……

"Hmm……"

After cracking my head thinking, I bought a can of drink from the automatic vendor, and tried to throw the can into the rubbish bin cover on Raika-san's head, in slight surrender. Of course, I just lightly placed it inside.

Thud! The can of beverage that slid into it stopped after hitting her head.

"……."

"……. Hot."

The canned drink containing lukewarm drink pressed closely onto her exposed forehead, and seemed to be rather hot.

As she couldn't continue her façade because of the heat, Raika-san shifted away the rubbish bin cover on her head and stood up.

"Yuuta, good morning."

"Good morning, senpai……"

Although it was already noon, thinking of it as a workplace greeting did sound reasonable. Though I can't say what type of workplace that is.

As for the people who turned around to look at me when they passed by, they gave an amazed shout of 'Ohhhh!' together as well. So it's indeed because of Raika-san that I was taken notice of? That's fine as well, it's okay as long as it's not Sako-senpai's conspiracy.

"Raika-san, do you have class today as well?"

“No.”

“If so, do you have any reports to hand in?”

“None as well.”

“So are you here for the set lunch A of the canteen?”

“That’s too oily, I don’t like it.”

All of my guesses missed the mark.

“I just……”

Raika-san spoke in a low tone.

“I thought of going out for a walk, and arrived here before I knew it.”

Speaking of which, I recall that the place Raika-san is staying at seems to be quite near to the college. However, nobody knows where her house is. I heard that a few brave, determined men tried to stalk Raika-san before I enrolled, but nobody could find out where she lives.

According to the rumors, they would lose sign of Raika-san halfway through. I heard that strange speculations that Raika-san was actually the descendant of ninjas even appeared for some time.

However, they were just rumors in the end.

She might just invite us directly to her house if us members of Roary request that of her. It’s just that I can’t mention the request of ‘Please take me to your house’ without any special reason.

Just like that, the private life of the number one beauty in the college is still a mystery up till now.

“Since I saw Yuuta after that, I thought of tailing you.”

“So you tailed me for awhile…… Is it possible that senpai had been following me ever since I exited the lecturer’s office?”

“That’s right.”

“Um…… You should’ve at least greeted me.”

Even when I said that to her, Raika-san just said in satisfaction: “It was quite fun.”

I don’t think that me in my pathetic ‘Master, please spare me some credits!’ mode while I repeatedly bowed down would be a happy scene. But if so, the biggest reason for me being in the limelight is now revealed. Since Raika-san kept following me, it would be stranger if I didn’t arouse other people’s attention.

If not for myself feeling light-headed because of happiness, I should have noticed her immediately as well…… Speaking of which, since I could see Raika-san’s rare appearance of evident happiness, let’s forget about such a trivial matter.

Seeing Raika-san starting to drink the canned juice that I dropped in on the bence, I bought a can of coffee and sat by her side as well. The wind was quite chilly, so the lukewarm beverage made me feel exceptionally warm.

“Is that good?”

“Not bad, though a bit sweet.”

After Raika-san finished speaking, she started to drink in small sips again. The canned juice that Hanamura-senpai, the captain of the Rugby Club, is so fond of doesn’t seem to have caught Raika-san’s fancy.

“Raika-san, what do you usually do in the holidays?”

“Many things.”

“You live just nearby, right? Do you walk over here?”

“Speed walking.”

How is it? The conversation that would make people question if it was really a conversation. If this is a party, it definitely won’t continue. However, it seemed like even such an empty conversation could make Raika-san happy, while I can experience happiness unknown to the others by conversing with Raika-san alone like this.

My reports have almost been completely finished, and added with the fact that I could speak to Raika-san, what a happy day.

“Raika-san, is it possible that……. You’re really free right now?”

“Quite.”

Raika-san said without even thinking. It seems like I'm just a person for her to whittle off time with.

That made me feel somewhat lonesome, but just at that moment, Raika-san spoke without any prior notice:

“Christmas, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Ah…… Y- Yeah! It’s the first time I’m celebrating Christmas with so many people, so I’m super looking forward to it!”

Unusually, Raika-san took the initiative to provide a topic, reinvigorating my spirits.

However, Raika-san spoke again after that:

“Hina-chan’s Christmas party, I’m looking forward to it.”

Is that so? So the main point is Hina, huh……

“Sora-chan’s concert as well. I’m looking forward to it.”

Well, Sora-chan haven’t lifted the ban for us to attend…… It seems like Raika-san’s main focus isn’t the parties, but my nieces. It made me quite embarrassed for my previous excitement.

“To me, half of the Christmas party is expectation, but the other half would be pressure……”

“……?”

Raika-san looked at me in puzzlement.

“Actually, I just couldn’t decide on what Christmas present I should pick……”

I tried to say that, and secretly hoped that Raika-san would discuss that with me.

“Oh.”

Eh? What a cold reaction!

“S- Senpai…… What do you think Sora-chan and the others would be happiest with”

“Don’t know.”

What a direct way of ignoring me. But that’s true, if I, as a member of the family, don’t know as well…...

“So you’re pressured because of this?”

“Nnn, ah, not only that…… I accidentally lied to Hina, saying that I’d prepare a super sumptuous bento for her Christmas party.

“Can Yuuta cook……?”

“Uuu……. Well……”

I explained the situation to Raika-san. After failing once, I am currently undergoing a hellish special training with Oba-san but I still have college to mind as well. Besides, Oba-san has a job as well, so I can’t just learn whenever I like to. She only comes over to our house when she helps out with the cooking, so the chances for that are unexpectedly low.

After hearing my explanation, Raika-san sank into deep thought.

“I’ll teach you then, teaching you some not-too-hard dishes that children like as well.”

“Eh……”

“I’ll teach you how to cook.”

“Raika-san wants to teach me……? Seriously!?”

Raika-san nodded slightly. The so-called fortune that is out of one’s expectation probably refers to things like this.

Although I haven’t checked out my horoscope today, most probably, this is probably my luckiest day in December.

After standing up, Raika-san faced me expressionlessly.

“I’m feeling bored anyway.”

…… That’s true. Thinking that I actually anticipated for an instant that senpai would say something sweet made me feel embarrassed. Uuu.

After shaving off its skin, carrots have to be shredded to cubical shape whenever possible.

On the other hand, potatoes have to be cut to bite-size. Apart from that, one absolutely must not forget to rinse them slightly with water. Onions must be shredded along its fiber, while shredding them would mean what it suggests to be, having to cut them to cut them to shreds as thin as a thread.

When handling potatoes, Oba-san wouldn't shave off the skin too quickly, but instead rinses them carefully, cutting them to larger pieces before popping them into the pan. After finishing the preparations, she would pour salad oil into the pan, frying the carrots and potatoes slightly after that. As it's easy for them to get charred during this moment, more care must be taken.

After heating up the surface of the veggies slightly, we add the soup, seasoning, miso, soy sauce, salt, onion and meat. Putting the meat in before the soup gets hot is the key.

After that, the pot has to be covered and cooked for ten minutes, allowing the dish to cool off with the fire turned off after that.

After teaching Sora how to make stewed meat with potato, Oba-san ended with a : 'Look, isn't this easy?'

"So that's all?"

"Nnn, you just have to allow it to cool and its taste to seep in."

Sora finally heaved a sigh in relief after hearing Oba-san say that.

Sora already improved a lot compared with the time when she was nervous even when she was holding a kitchen knife, but when she was cooking in front of Oba-san, it still made her rather tense. Apart from Oba-san's stern personality that gives people pressure, having a person looking at her at a side made her somewhat excited as well. That might be the sense of ease when a mature lady is by her side.

"…… The taste…… doesn't seem to be too bad."

Oba-san spoke after tasting the dish slightly.

“Really?”

“Although it would be a bit too light for a man’s taste, stewing it once more to adjust its taste would be fine.”

“T- Thank you, Oba-san!”

Sora struggled to suppress her impulse of wanting to jump up in happiness.

After all, all of her efforts would go to waste of she was scolded ‘That’s so improper of you!’ in the end.

“Speaking of which, in such a short time, you are still learning quite quickly.”

Oba-san smiled at Sora after saying that.

“Ah…..”

That instant, an inexplicable sense of nostalgia welled up in Sora’s heart.

—I remember now…… It’s Yuri-san.

The warmth that she kept feeling when Oba-san was teaching her to cook was the feeling forgotten by Sora in this period of time, a feeling similar to that of her stepmother.

“Well then, it’s about time for me to go back. Remember not to stew the stewed meat with potato for too long.

“O- Okay. Thank you very much for today.”

Sora hurriedly bowed, while Oba-san quickly collected her belongings and left immediately.

In the end, Sora was the only one left.

Miu had already went out in the morning to play, so she wasn't at home, while Hina went over to Shiori's house.

"He's still not back huh……"

Sora spaced out, lying on the sofa while staring outside the window. She really wished for Yuuta to try her cooking earlier, and really hoped that he would praise it with words like 'So tasty!' or 'You're so awesome!' or the like.

"Why won't Onii-chan come back earlier…… Idiot."

Some time passed after that.

Sora widened her eyes slightly. It seemed like she fell asleep for some time.

The stewed meat with potato should have been nicely stewed, and it is currently suitable for tasting.

"I'm back."

Just at that moment, Yuuta's voice appeared at the best moment.

"……! He's back!"

Sora ran over to the entrance in excitement.

"Onii-chan, welcome home! Listen, I just—"

In an instant, Sora-chan froze as she reached the entrance.

For some reason, Yuuta returned along with Raika.

"Good afternoon, Sora-chan."

"Ah, nnn, good afternoon……"

Facing the unexpected guest, Sora did not know how to respond.

Just when Sora was feeling flustered, Yuuta spoke words that made her feel taken aback.

“I’m going out after leaving my things to buy something with Raika-san.”

“Buy things……?”

“Yep, we’re going to buy some ingredients as Raika-san is going to teach me how to cook after this.”

Sora froze yet again.

How can this be…… And at this moment as well?

I made the perfect stewed meat with potato after so much effort, but you don’t even have the time to try it?

Dissatisfaction and anger surged from her heart, causing Sora to almost feel like venting all of her emotions on Yuuta right on the spot.

However, Sora tried hard to hold it in.

“I- Is that so. Then be careful on the road.”

“Nnn. I think I won’t return too late, but do remember to close the doors and windows well.”

Leaving those words, Yuuta went out with Raika yet again.

After the door of the entrance was closed, about a minute passed.

“Idiot Onii-chan!”

Sora shouted at the entrance.

As I left the house, I suddenly felt as though someone was calling me, and thus turned around to look.

“Yuuta, what’s wrong?”

“Hmm……? Did you hear anything just now?”

“Nope.”

Raika-san shook her head.

“Am I just thinking too much……?”

I left my stuff at home, and departed with Raika-san after informing Sora-chan that I was going out. Although going back and forth on this road was somewhat troublesome, I still thought that it would be better to tell Sora-chan about it. That’s right, let’s make a great dinner tonight, giving them a huge surprise.

Since Raika-san is here, there won’t be a problem. Probably. If I can ask senpai to help choose the three sisters’ Christmas present along the way, all of my recent worries would be immediately solved.

Sora lied down on the sofa.

Her cheeks puffed up to twice their original size obviously showed her displeasure.

“We’re back!”

“Back~”

Even when her sisters returned, Sora was still unmoved.

“Eh? What a nice smell…… Um, what’s wrong, Onee-chan?”

“Uuu~”

“Erm…… I don’t know what ‘Uuu~’ means.”

“…… Onii-chan……”

“What’s wrong with Oji-san? Is it possible that you argued with him again?”

“We didn’t argue~”

Sora buried her face in the cushion and shook her head.

“He left! Out to buy something with Raika-san!”

With her jaw agape in surprise, Miu suddenly caught hold of her sister’s shoulders.

“Then what are you doing here!? Onee-chan!”

“M- Miu……?”

“You’ll have to give chase! Hurry!”

Miu’s eyes sparkled with the radiance of anticipation and curiosity.

Raika-san and I headed directly towards the Ikebukuro station from the house. Although it was a weekday, there were still quite a lot of pedestrians before the station. Raika-san’s walking pace was even quicker than I had imagined, being completely unaffected by the passing pedestrians, walking quickly through the crowd.

In any case, I couldn’t just hold senpai’s hand like a child afraid to get lost, so I could only try hard to chase her. Not long after that, Raika-san walked into a department store and immediately walked in the direction of a food court at the basement.

There were things that wouldn’t usually be sold at other places displayed at the supermarket at the basement of the department store, but the prices of those were especially expensive, so it was a place mostly unrelated to a normal citizen like me.

However, Raika-san unhesitatingly walked towards her target merchandise at the high class supermarket, looking as though she was quite used to this.

“Raika-san, what are you planning to buy over here?”

“Mnn, this.”

After saying that, she pointed at a rack with spices arranged on it. The spices on the rack were in a transparent glass bottle that would usually be seen only in science labs, arraged densely on the rack.

“Is…… this it?”

Raika-san ignored my speechless response, and continued to place bottles of spices into her shopping basket.

“To our next destination.”

After she finished taking the spices, she headed towards another place with other ingredients.

Although there was only an extremely terrible premonition in my heart, I could only continue to follow her.

Just at that moment, at a position not far away—

“I found Oji-san!”

“Found him~”

Miu and Hina said while poking their heads from behind the rack, and it could be clearly seen from their expressions that they were enjoying the situation. At the same time, the only person who had unease on her face was……

“Say, let’s not continue.”

Behind her sisters, Sora looked quite troubled.

“Onee-chan, seriously, do you really think it’s fine for us to leave Oji-san like this?”

“Like this?”

Hina imitated Miu by pouting while speaking.

“But following them behind them is really too……”

Sora couldn’t push away the guilt in her heart.

“Ah! It seems like they’re leaving! Let’s go, Hina!”

“Roger!”

“Hey! Wait for me!”

Sora could only follow her sisters who were completely absorbed in the role of a detective.

After we finished buying the ingredients, Raika-san spoke: “We need utensils.”

Since it already reached this state, I can only go along until the end. I continued to follow her while harboring such thoughts.

As before, senpai walked rather quickly, and I nearly lost her quite a few times, but I still struggled to follow. I really don't know what I'm here for.

Even though we were just here to buy ingredients, from goodness knows when, I felt so tired that I felt that I was going for an adventure in a forest, or even climbing a snowy mountain. And the location that I reached wasn't a destination of gold, but a home electronics store.

"Um…… Raika-san, why do I feel like we're getting further and further away from normal dishes……"

"Does Yuuta own a spices grinder at home?"

"Spices grinder…...? No, I don't think we have something like that…… Speaking of which, we need to use such a thing!?"

Just when I was saying that, Raika-san already picked one up and walked towards the cashier.

At the same time, the three detective sisters were staying nearby as well.

They closely tailed Yuuta, who was behind Raika.

"What do they want to buy……?"

From the moment they entered the home electronics store, the three of them already started to feel puzzled, and they really didn't know what Raika and Yuuta were there for. Not long after that, Raika bought a machine that could be hugged with one's hands.

"What is that…… Say, Miu, what do you think that is…… Oi! What are you doing!?"

"Ah~ So good~"

Sora turned around and found Miu lying on a massage chair.

“Wa~ This is so great~”

“Nee-tan! Nee-tan! Hina too! Hina too!”

“It’s too early for you!”

“Nee-tan is sly~”

Hina forcefully tugged on Miu’s sleeve, but Miu already became one with the massage chair, and it felt like she wouldn’t move even with a jack.

“Miu! How long are you going to lie there for!”

“Eh~ Just a little more……”

“Just ignore that, Onii-chan and Raika-san are leaving!”

After forcing her sister away from the massage chair, Sora continued to shadow them.

After that, Raika-san arrived at the area selling liquor.

She bought a bottle of wine that I never once saw in my life and left quickly.

“…… Nnn, we’re done.”

“I- Is that so……”

It seems like she finished buying the ingredients.

From what I had seen along the way, I was worried that Raika-san was going to make dishes that would require a lot of effort, but I disregarded that for the moment.

Compared with that, there was an even more pressing matter that I had to ask senpai of.

“Raika-san, before going back to cook…… Can you accompany me to buy presents?”

“……”

Raika-san looked at me with her clear eyes that was like a glass ornament.

That made me feel a sense of pressure.

“Yes. But I don’t think it will help.”

“Eh?”

After saying that, Raika-san quickly weaved through the supermarket.

“Things that middle and primary school students might like are in this area.”

Raika-san brought me to an area selling popular accessories. There were many brands that I never even heard of over there, and also glittering ornaments that I never saw before.

“Hmm…… Which would be better……?”

“Don’t know. I said this before.”

Raika-san made a true poker face.

“I seem to be different with other people, so it’s no use if you ask me.”

……? Raika-san seemed unusually impatient.

Or perhaps, Raika-san…… actually feels troubled? Or angry?

“…… Well then, what does Raika-san like?”

The item that she pointed at was a cute brooch, like the cute things that primary school students would use.

But isn't it a bit too cute…… Even if I let Sora-chan or Miu-chan use it, it's just too…… However, it does feel quite suited for Hina.

"T- This?"

"I know that it doesn't suit me looking from an objective perspective, so you don't need to mind."

Raika-san spoke while maintaining her poker face, and walked away as though she wanted to forget about the brooch.

"The three sisters are very thoughtful, so they'll be okay with it as long as it's chosen by Yuuta."

Such a formal conclusion made me feel as though senpai was refusing for me to ask for her opinion once more.

The detective squad of the three sisters could not hear Raika and Yuuta's conversation, so they were quite anxious.

"T- Their atmosphere seems to be quite okay, Onee-chan!"

"R- Really? And they never did buy anything after so long!"

The eldest sister's tense emotion was completely exposed, and her tightly clenched hands were both red.

"Hina is thirsy~"

Hina, who started to feel bored, announced in displeasure.

“Onee-chan will buy orange juice for you later, so please wait for a moment more!”

“Wa! Orange juice!”

Seeing the two starting to move again, the three sisters gave chase as well.

Raika-san stopped before a display window. At the corner of her gaze were models wearing the newest clothes this season. Perhaps there are clothes that senpai likes among them?

“Raika-san……?”

“Ah, sorry, it’s nothing.”

After saying that, she turned around and left…… But not two steps after that, senpai turned around to look at the window as though she couldn’t resist the temptation.

“Um…… Do you want to go in for a look?”

“…… Can I?”

“Of course. Besides, you like it, right?”

Like a child, Raika-san nodded.

“Well then, let’s go in for a look. Although I’m like this right now, if you don’t mind……”

As I was holding so much, I looked like a country bumpkin unrelated with fashionable clothes no matter how people look at me.

“Well then, let us enter.”

Raika-san entered the shop looking rather happy, though she still wore a poker face.

The three sisters were still tailing them.

They thought that the two had already finished buying their things, but they entered a boutique for some reason.

“Oh, so Raika-san buys clothes at places like this, how surprising. Ah, but from the size of her breasts, she can probably buy clothes only at shops like this.”

Miu muttered thoughtfully.

However, Sora heard next to nothing of Miu’s voice.

— What’s with this…… It feels super annoying.

However, Sora did not know the reason. Why was she so displeased?

They just entered to look at the clothes……

“But, it’s just like…… they’re on a date.”

“……!?”

Miu’s words made Sora waver.

A date.

A boy and a girl buying things, watching movies, and having fun together.

That moment, a certain emotion started to boil in Sora’s heart.

“What, what…… Onii-chan……”

Sora struggled to suppress the word ‘Idiot’ that nearly slipped out of her mouth, and kept glaring at Yuuta as though she was using her gaze to kill her target as he wore a silly smile on his face.

“Guwagh!?”

A sudden chill came on my back.

“What is it?”

“No! Nothing!”

I spoke to Raika-san behind the curtains.

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What happened just now?
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I had a feeling like I was targeted by a carnivorous beast. But in any case, it’s impossible for carnivorous beasts to appear in the center of Tokyo like this. Whatever, I’m now facing a critical moment.

Although I’m not sure what sort of critical moment it is, but…… It’s just a critical moment anyway!

Being able to go to a boutique with a girl that one likes, waiting outside while she enters the changing room to change, how can this be described in any way other than a critical moment?

Even when I was holding a pile of mystifying spices and ingredients, even if Raika-san don’t feel like this as well……!

But hasn’t this turned into an undeniable date?

No, this is a date.

Nnn, date, it’s just like this. That’s what I say!

“Whoaa……. Date…… A date, huh……”

After speaking out the facts, apart from the sense of realism, a strange sense of accomplishment surged in my heart as well.

Although the employees looked at me with an expression that was like they saw something disguising, the current me will never take such gazes to heart.

After all, I’m on a date right now.

Just when I was thinking so, Raika-san opened the curtains of the changing room and walked out.

The clothes that senpai was wearing was the same as before.

“Eh? Didn’t you change?”

“Couldn’t get in.”

Raika-san spoke in slight displeasure.

“Couldn’t get in means……”

“My breasts couldn’t get in.”

“B- Breasts……!?”

The employee and I couldn’t help but glance at Raika-san’s overly well-endowed breasts. After that, we raised our heads and exchanged gazes. The female employee probably had the same thoughts as I.

“Please give me a larger size.”

After Raika-san said that, the employee spoke in a slightly cracked voice: “Y- Yes! Please wait for a moment!”, and ran to the back.

“Indeed, there aren’t any that suits me.”

“It’s hard on senpai as well….. Um…… In many aspects.”

In slight impatience, Raika-san held her breasts that long exceeded the standard size of a Japanese.

Even if they’re not men, it was a scene that would make people stop and stare.

If possible, I really wish senpai would be more self-aware.

Not long after that, the employee who ran over to the back of the shop came back while holding a pile of clothes.

It seemed like she brought all of the clothes that Raika-san might be able to wear.

Raika-san picked out two that she liked and showed them to me.

“Which one is better?”

“Y- You’re asking for my opinion!?”

Raika-san nodded.

What a headache, which should I choose?

There were too little factors to judge from. However, If I am unable to reply now, I might be treated as an indecisive man who lacks determination.

…… Ah!? Perhaps Raika-san is testing me exactly for this?

“I think this one is—“

“Nnn, then let’s pick this one.”

Raika-san took the one that I didn't choose and returned to the changing room.

Why do I feel like my love had just met a crisis? Can someone give me better taste!

However, my question seemed to be unfounded in the end.

I saw senpai wave at me from the dressing room.

“How is it?”

Raika-san asked in front of me after she finished changing.

She looked extremely beautiful, as though it was specially made for her.

…… However, isn’t the chest part a bit too open!

Besides, even if I wanted to look away, I still couldn’t help but see a certain white thing exposed from Raika-san’s original clothes folded neatly on the chair…… I think I’m going to have a nosebleed.

After seeing my expression, Raika-san's poker face seemed to look more satisfied.

"Nnn, I know Yuuta's interests now. It's as I expected."

In the current me, exceptionally embarrassed emotions continued to well up in my heart…… How regretful.

And of course, the three sisters witnessed the instant Yuuta made the choice of his life and failed as well.

Including the looks of Yuuta's silly laugh due to him being unable to stand up to beauty.

"What……"

Sora gritted her teeth in anger.

"Onee-chan, didn't you say just now that we shouldn't follow them?"

"Yeah~"

"Shut up! I'm monitoring Onii-chan so that he won't do anything silly to Raika-san!"

Facing her sister's explanation that lacked conviction, Miu could only brush it away by shrugging.

When she has an unfrank elder sister, being the younger sister is quite hard as well.

"Ack……"

Just at that moment, a harsh cry that did not match her appearance came from Miu.

Because at the corner of her gaze……. She saw the persistent man who proclaimed himself to be a star scout.

“I found you! I wanted to see you so much!”

“I just refused you last time!”

“Please don’t say that, really, just listen to me for just a moment!”

“Noooo—! Don’t come over~”

Simlar to the last time, the star scout (self-proclaimed) that did not know when to stop at all, approached Miu with a smile on his face that shone with the sheen of oil.

“Wait a minute! What are you planning to do to my sister!”

“Ah, the elder sister? Ohhh! Even the sister is extremely…… Okay! If so, the three of you can come together!”

“Don’t decide things by yourself!”

Because of the commotion, the pedestrians nearby approached.

Of course, Yuuta and Raika were no exception……

“Miu-chan……? Wait a sec, why is everyone over here!?”

“Oji-san! This person is just too tiresome! Hurry up and think of a way!”

“So you’re their relative!? Just at the right moment!”

“Ehhhhhhh!? Wait a sec, what sort of situation is this!?”

Seeing the sweaty man pestering him without giving up made Yuuta wail piteously.

“We were just too unlucky……”

When we were on the slope back home, I sighed. No matter how I refused the man who proclaimed himself to be a star scout, he continued to pester me by saying: ‘I’ll think of a way!’. In the end, I understood that he completely didn’t plan to hear our answer, or I should say he couldn’t hear it at all, so we slipped away as soon as we found a chance.

And just because we ran away with all our might, all of our energy and power had been sapped.

“That guy was quite stubborn.”

“It can’t be dismissed as stubbornness anymore. He was still planning to keep chasing! Good thing he couldn’t move anymore halfway through.”

As Sora-chan said, if that person’s weight is more standard, he might really have chased us to our house.

“Hehe……”

Just at that moment, I felt as though Raika-san’s mouth curled somewhat. Of course, it was just a change of a few millimeters, but well, I could feel it from the atmosphere.

“Raika-san, did you smile just now?”

When I turned around, she was still wearing an unchanging poker face.

“Eh? Did I make a mistake?”

“…… You were mistaken, I can’t smile at all.”

“That’s impossible, aren’t you always smiling?”

After I said that, Raika-san showed an expression that felt as though she was surprised from the bottom from her heart. Very unusually, changes measured in centimeters appeared on her brows and mouth.

“Um, it’s true, although it’s not so obvious as the others, but……. You are always smiling. Or perhaps I should say that you look to me like you’re smiling……”

Why do I feel more unconfident the more I say?

But it’s unmistakable, Raika-san smiled just now as well.

“I……. Smiled…….”

Did I say anything that I shouldn’t? Raika-san stood rooted to her original spot, and sank into deep thought.

“Oi-tan! Hina is hungy~”

“Huh……. Nn, that’s true, it’s already time for dinner after all…… Hmm?”

Eh? I felt like I forgot about something important as well…… No, I must have thought too much.

In any case, I only want to go back home and lie on my sofa right now.

“Well then, let’s start.”

As soon as we returned, Raika-san spoke.

“Start what……?”

“Have you forgotten?”

“…… Ah.”

I remembered. That’s right, I asked Raika-san here to teach me cooking.

“Raika-san, so what are we going too cook?”

“Something simple that even children would like, curry.”

Raika-san spoke without hesitating.

What? I thought that we were going to make something troublesome since she bought so much……

That’s true. To a beginner, something like curry is the easiest dish to master. Speaking of which, curry and stewed rice just needs the powder, so it’s rather hard to fail at making it, so it can count as common dishes in our household as well.

“Well then, what should I do……”

Just when I was asking in slight disappointment, Raika-san took out a bottle containing large amounts of spices and placed it on the table in the kitchen.

“Erm…… Raika-san?”

I asked while looking at Raika-san with an uneasy premonition surfacing in my heart.

“Well then, let’s start from making the spice.”

“The super traditional type!? We aren’t using curry powder!?”

But of course. Raika-san declared with her unchanging poker face.

“I don’t know how to make that type.”

In the end, it was two hours after that before we could eat our dinner with an empty stomach.

Before I realized it, the pointer on the clock on the wall had already moved to the ten o’ clock position.

Although it was quite time-consuming, fortunately, the traditional Indian curry was quite outstanding in taste.

However, instead of saying that I, who helped out at a side, provided assistance, I might have made trouble even more, so that might be a part that I need to reflect on. In any case, Raika-san's original curry and Sora-chan's stewed meat with potato made us all stuffed.

"It was just too tasty~"

Lying on the sofa, Miu spoke while caressing her stomach like a pregnant woman.

Judging from her tone, she seemed to be quite satisfied.

"Stomach so full~"

Hina lied down to copy Miu-chan by caressing her stomach as well.

"Really? That's great."

Looking somewhat intoxicated, Raika-san sat between the both of them.

"Raika-chan, touch my belly~"

Hearing Hina's comments, Raika-san nodded furiously and started to stroke Hina's abdomen.

"Ah, it seems to be quite comfortable."

After hearing Miu-chan say so in admiration, Raika-san gave her the thumbs up and stroked Miu-chan's stomach with her other hand. The two of them really seemed to be quite happy, while Raika-san looked even more delighted.

"Yuuta, really, give them to me."

It’s here, I really didn’t hear it for quite a long time……. However, no means no.

“Huh~ I want to eat Raika-san’s cooking every day.”

“Hina too~”

“That’s right! Raika-san, can you just be Oji-san’s bride?”

“W- What are you blabbering about!? Miu!”

“If so, you can be together with Hina forever!”

“Being together with Hina-chan forever……. How tempting.”

“W- Wait a minute, Raika-san, don’t treat it like it’s real!”

Although I felt like I was only teased by them, I still couldn’t suppress my tension.

“So? Does Raika-san like Oji-san?”

“L- Let’s not talk about this anymore!”

“I don’t dislike him.”

She gave a rather vague answer.

How should I see such an answer as?

“……”

Just at that moment, I noticed Sora-chan, who was being displeased at a side.

“What’s wrong? Are you unhappy with anything?”

“…… It’s nothing!”

As Sora-chan forcefully moved her face away, she seemed to be quite angry.

Sora left the living room as though she was running away. Although she felt somewhat bad for Raika as she used up her own time to help out for dinner, Sora just couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Sheesh…… Even though I made some as well……"

Her stewed meat and potato that she struggled to make was a dish that even Oba-san praised.

However, the pot was almost untouched.

"I'm angry now. On Christmas…… Wait and see! I'll definitely cook something up that's more delicious than Onii-chan's!"

At a place where no one could see, Sora secretly resolved to herself.

Chapter 5 – Oba-san and Photos

In the middle of December, the streets of Ikebukuro was already giving off the atmosphere of Christmas.

And of course, Tobu at the west pass and Seibu at the east pass, the two large department stores expressed the style of a top recreational street in the country, having decorations hung everywhere, fully presenting a multi-colored presence.

However, the problems of our family were stopped at a state where not even half was solved.

Although these problems might not be too much compared with our state in the summer break, as we aren't encountering anything big, but even so, nothing can be looked over.

In the days when almost everyday refreshes the record of 'coldest in this year', I hurried towards the garbage dump.

Although most of my reports had been completed, I still needed to deal with the reports that come with normal classes, so my state was still quite far away from the winter break.

As practice for the Christmas concert, Sora-chan went out even earlier than usual, which would be what we call as morning exercise. As Sora-chan's end of the semester exams recently ended, I was somewhat worried of the condition of her body.

Apart from that, Sora-chan had to practice cooking with Oba-san as well, so she was in a state when she was even busier than me. However, it was a happy thing for me instead.

Even though I was somewhat apologetic about this, I actually felt quite happy that Sora-chan could rely on me for the housework.

Even so, we still didn't have any intention of coming to a consensus regarding Hina's Christmas bento.

After tirelessly practicing, our skills had visible improvements…… That should have been so.

Speaking of which, the reason that I'm taking the trash out in the cracks of dawn is because Sora-chan already went out early in the morning for her morning exercise, and we already missed a day for rubbish collection this week. As the leftover food in the house increased due to the cooking lessons, Sora-chan and Miu-chan were fiercely scolded by Oba-san.

Although Miu-chan said that she would take it out, that'd be like putting the cart before the horse. On such a cold morning, of course I can't just let a primary schooler take these unexpectedly heavy rubbish bags.

Just like that, I held three large bags of rubbish and walked quickly towards the rubbish dump.

That moment, I noticed a silhouette walking in front, a high school girl struggling to walk forward while holding rubbish bags that seemed to be as heavy as mine. It was Shiori-chan who lived opposite to us.

“Good morning, Shiori-chan.”

Hearing me speak from behind, she jumped slightly and turned around to look at me with a rather stiff expression.

“…… Morning. It seems like it isn’t Sora-chan today.”

“Haha, well aren’t you solemn, but I don’t let Sora-chan take the trash out every day as well.”

“…… Is that so?”

Shiori-chan’s somewhat stern manner on me wasn’t anything new, but I didn’t think I did anything to make her dislike me…… When I thought of that, I couldn’t help but feel somewhat sad.

That moment, I noticed something as well. Quite a few bags of trash were piled up before their house.

“Eh? Seems like there’s quite a lot of trash today. Are you taking them out collectively?”

“Ah…… My mother seemed to have forgotten to take out the trash, thank you for your concern.”

Shiori-chan’s face reddened in embarrassment, and said while shaking her head in helplessness.

Oh, so that’s how it is. If so, this is the time for me to take charge.

“Okay. Here we go!”

Apart from the three bags of trash that I was carrying, I lifted two more bags of trash as well.

“W- Wait a minute! You don’t need to trouble yourself!”

“Haha! Don’t mind about it, as I always trouble you to take care of Hina as well.”

“That’s not troublesome….. My mother felt happy about it instead…… Me too.”

“Thanks. But since there’s a chance for me to help, I’m happy as well, so please allow me to help out.”

Without waiting for her response, I walked away. It was my unconcealed gratitude. If not for Shiori-chan and her family living right opposite to us, our lives would definitely be harsher as we need to send and fetch Hina to and from the kindergarten.

Being able to repay them albeit a little at such a time really made me happy.

Naturally, we walked side by side on the road, but…… Uh oh, we don’t have any topics in common to chat about.

When I think about it, I don’t have much experience of speaking with women. If it were to be Nimura, he could probably think of an interesting topic that wouldn’t bore Shiori-chan……

“…… Why?”

When I was cracking my head thinking of a topic to chat about, the hesitant words entered my ears.

I wondered if Shiori-chan had a fever, as her face seemed to be somewhat red.

“Eh?”

“Why are you…… living with those children? Won’t living alone be easier?”

Shiori-san said with her head lowered as she carried an equally heavy bag of rubbish.

“Is it…… due to any reason?”

I felt mystified as I wasn’t really sure what Shiori-chan was saying.

“Um…… What are you talking about?”

As I grabbed on to the five bags of rubbish, I asked while walking by her side.

“…… It’s nothing.”

After we reached the rubbish dump, we dumped the large amouth of trash inside.

“Phew! That would probably be fine.”

“Nnn, thank you.”

Shiori-chan bowed to me with her head lowered while her face was still flushed.

“Don’t mention it. It’s nothing compared with the help that you usually give.”

With a smile on my face…… I spoke again after some thought:

“Shiori-chan, about your previous question……”

“Eh……?”

“I think, it’s probably for the same reason that you’re helping us.”

After saying that, I smiled. To be honest, I think I gained even more instead when I live with the three sisters…… Just looking at me made me feel

happy, and want to help them automatically…… I think that it's definitely the same for Shiori-chan.

"How an this……"

She looked at me in surprise. When you look at her from the front, she really is quite a cute girl.

"T- That's not it! I'm not like that at all!"

For some reason, she suddenly denied in agitation…… Whoops, did I say anything wrong?

I headed towards my house, while Shiori-chan walked behind me.

She mumbled something that I couldn't hear without stop.

Shiori looked at the unexpectedly wide back of Yuuta's silhouette, and was unable to suppress her vigorous heartbeat.

"…… Sheesh, doesn't it seem like you're a nice person if so?"

Because of that, it was as though she kept imagining herself as the filthy person.

Apart from that, Shiori realized that Yuuta was completely different from the other males that she got to know in the past.

"Although I don't like him that much…… He seems to be…… Quite cool."

Shiori felt like she understood slightly the reason the three sisters liked Yuuta that much.

Speaking of which, if it's just a conversation of this extent, I probably don't need to think so much, huh? Halfway through her walk, Shiori started to

think of things concerning Yuuta that would make people want to do a tsukkomi on her. *A young man who stood up for his relative's daughters…… When you think of it like that, he's actually not bad.*

Thinking of that, Shiori suddenly started to feel ashamed of her previous attitude.

As usual, Kitahara Shiori was a girl who easily falls into delusions.

At the same time when Shiori-chan and I reached the front door, a cheery voice rang behind me.

"Oji-san~ ♪ I'm almost late now, so I'm going to school first~"

After saying that, Miu hurriedly closed the steel door of the entrance.

"Oh, good morning. It seems like you didn't forget to take out the trash today."

Coincidentally, Oba-san appeared just that moment. She's quite early today.

While Oba-san smiled wryly as though she saw through my thoughts.

"I have some other matters to attend to today, so I came over early. Besides, if Yuuta-san forgets to take out the trash today as well, that just won't do."

…… In other words, Oba-san doesn't trust me at all? Whatever, I brought it on myself.

"Good morning, Oba-san."

Miu-chan bowed with her head lowered as soon as she saw Oba-san, while Hina's voice could be heard right after Oba-san nodded slightly in reponse.

"Oi-ta~n! Oi-tan ta~n ♪"

Hina furiously waved at me behind the steel door that she was still unable to open. As I dozed off in the kitchen that morning, I hurriedly rushed to take out the trash as soon as I woke up, so it was the first time I saw Hina for the day. Hina is as cute as ever. Great.

After I nodded happily, Miu-chan, whose hair wasn't the least bit messy, and was fully expressing the style of a young beauty, spoke to me right after that:

"Oji-san, I'll count on you to send Hina to the kindergarten today."

"Ah, nnn, take care on the road."

I greeted Miu-chan and hurried to Hina's side without even having the time to watch Miu-chan leave.

"Oi-tan and Shiori Nee-tan, good morning ♪"

With a broad smile on her face, Hina looked cute no matter you look at her from the top, from the right, from the left, or from the front.

"Good morning, Hina-chan."

"Shiori Nee-tan's unifom…… So good! Hina likes it!"

"The uniform of Hina-chan's kindergarten is cute as well."

"Hina likes this better~"

"Then you must grow up more, Hina-chan."

The scene of a uniformed young beauty and a cute toddler in a kindergarten uniform praising each other is really one that people would smile at from the bottom of one's heart when they see it.

"There's drool on Oi-tan's face~"

…… Eh?

“Yuuta-san, you’re probably wearing pajamas or casual clothing, aren’t you?”

“And also, your hair is messy as well.”

I was finally aware of my current appearance after Oba-san and Shiori-chan calmly did a tsukkomi on me.

Uh oh, after battling my pile of reports, I went outside in the casual clothing that I wore from the previous night. I got careless just by thinking that I was just taking out the trash.

“Ack! Ahh~ Wait, I still have to send Hina to the kindergarten!”

If so, that means I must hurry up and change at home.

“Uh oh, we’re short on time.”

While I muttered with my face pale, Shiori-chan squatted in front of Hina and waved her hand.

“Well then, Onee-san is going to school now. Good bye.”

“Nnn! Good bye~”

After bidding farewell with Hina with a smile, Shiori-chan smiled while bowing to Oba-san as well, and finally ignored my presence with her face red, leaving just like that. She seemed to have placed her bag before her house, how thoughtful.

“Oi-tan?”

It’s not the time for me to think about this now. Miu-chan already dealt with Hina’s preparations before going out, and what’s left was for me to change as soon as possible……

Oba-san looked at me as I was running around in circles, a strangely friendly smile on her face, even though there wasn't any trace of a smile in her gaze.

"It seems like you still need quite some time to prepare. Allow me to take Hina-san to the kindergarten. Before I come back, you should change and wash your face along the way."

"S- Sorry……"

"…… As for the problem of you not being able to manage your lifestyle properly, let us talk about that in detail after this."

"Sorry!"

I could only press my head to a low position. The road to become an excellent…… No, to become a normal guardian is really full of hardships.

After ending her morning exercise for the Choir Club, Sora couldn't help but sigh faintly on her seat in the classroom.

The morning exercise of the Choir Club forty minutes prior to lessons was still smooth as of now, and the attendance record was quite good as well, while everyone had improvements as well. As for Sora's solo part, Kiyomi and Youko were both giving her special trainings.

Singing too much made Sora's throat feel somewhat hot. It seemed like she should take note not to push herself too much, as it was easy for the throat to ache in such dry weather, but the reason for Sora's sigh was not because of this.

"Is Onii-chan okay……"

Sora only found out that Yuuta slept on the sofa in the living room when she went to the restroom at the cracks of dawn. Although she helped cover Yuuta with a blanket, she thought that it might have been better if she woke him up and asked him to sleep on his bed.

“I wonder if he managed to take out the trash on time……”

However, Sora could not bear to wake Yuuta, but if she took it out, Yuuta would definitely be unhappy. Recently, instead of saying that Yuuta was overprotective of Sora, she thought that it was more like…… he couldn’t trust her.

“Sheesh, why am I so troubled!”

When she thought about it, she felt like she kept arguing with Yuuta recently. Although they would reconcile very quickly, and all of them were trivial matters, they were quite important to Sora.

“Sigh……”

It seemed like she failed to grasp matters regarding timing. When Sora started to feel depressed on her seat, she noticed a silhouette before her eyes.

“Good morning, Sora-san.”

“Ah, Youko-chan, good morning.”

Sora was already used to the fact that she and Youko were calling each other by name. At the same time when she greeted Youko with a smile, she heaved a sigh of relief in her heart. One instant, Sora even thought that it was Daiki who was greeting her, causing her to feel tension.

While facing the somewhat rough Daiki, Sora did indeed feel disheartened, but she still understood that he was a kind person. Even though she knew that in her heart, she would still feel frightened on reflex when she hadn’t prepared herself mentally. However, she actually got used to it by now.

“Fufu, did you think that I was Maeshima-kun?”

“Sheesh! Don’t do that!”

Facing her friend who was smiling mischievously, Sora showed a somewhat displeased expression.

“I was just joking. You’re quite cheerful these days, that’s good. You seemed to have finished practicing in time, so as your friend, I’m quite proud as well. Judging from the current circumstances, there won’t be any problem regarding the Choir Club.”

When Youko speaks like this, it would mean that she has something else to say. Sora was gradually grasping the personality of her friend who shares the shame interests as her who was quickly getting closer to her.

“…… Youko-chan, is there anything wrong with the Literary Club?”

“You’re so smart, Sora-san. Regarding an important event at the end of the year, I wish to discuss it with you.”

“Eh? Ehhhh!? End of the year as in the Christmas concert?”

“Of course, that’s important as well, but what I want to talk about is an event unrelated to the Choir Club?”

What kind of event is it?

“It’s the winter Comiket. I’m thinking if you’re able to go with me.”

What, so it’s just the winter Comiket? As she nearly responded like that, Sora’s thoughts stopped functioning for an instant. The said winter Comiket would be a large-scale doujinshi market held at the end of the year, which would be the type of event the event that Yuri, as Sora’s stepmother and Yuuta’s sister, once liked. Even though Yuri once promised Sora that she would bring Sora there one day, however……

“It seems like you never went before. If so, let’s start from cospla……”

“Y-, Y-, Y- Y- Y-, Youko-chan!”

Sora hurriedly stood up from the chair and planned to cover Youko’s mouth.

…… However, she couldn’t do such a vigorous act in the end, and could only gesture frantically to Youko. Sora really didn’t hope for Youko to speak of dangerous terms like winter Comiket, cosplay or the like in places like the classroom.

“Relax, nobody would hear.”

Youko stated so directly with a relaxed attitude, but to Sora, such a situation was so worrisome that it would make her heart accelerate in an instand, even feeling that the sound of her heartbeat almost spread through the whole classroom.

“How is it? You’re starting to feel tense? Then why don’t you officially become a new cosplayer at the winter Comiket, training your courage for your solo part in the Christmas concert?”

“Um…… Isn’t the winter Comiket after the concert?”

“You found out.”

Youko spoke as though nothing happened.

“…… Youko-chan.”

“I was joking about cosplay, but if it’s convenient for you, I wasn’t joking when I asked you if you want to go to the winter Comiket with me. Think about it.”

After saying that with a smile, Youko stood up from the seat and turned around to say to Sora as she returned to her own seat:

“Of course, if you’re willing to do cosplay, I welcome that very much as well.”

The bomb that Youko left caused Sora to feel dazed on her seat.

Just when Sora was in shock in her classroom, Miu, as the second sister of the Takanashi family, was situated in a commotion completely opposite to that of Sora’s.

“Miu-chan, you’ll join my party, right?”

“What are you babbling about! Miu-chan already promised pass Christmas together!”

“You’re the one who’s babbling! Miu-chan told me she’s going to the Tokyo Disneyland with me……”

A crowd of boys was surrounded by Miu’s seat while squabbling non-stop.

While the girls looked from afar.

However, they did not give Miu, who gathered the goodwill of the boys in the class on herself, cold gazes. Their gazes were more like that of one who was thinking that it was hard for her.

Currently, the fact that Miu has an ‘old boyfriend who seems to be somewhat of a good-for-nothing’ had already been quite widespread, and even if that wasn’t the truth, the girls in the class bore goodwill on Miu as well.

Being cute, friendly and serious, Miu doesn’t have any quality that would make people dislike her. Although being the most popular person among the boys was a problem, Miu never once showed off to the others about this.

The other girls who saw this thought instead: This kind of beauty is indeed quite rare, so it can't be helped that she would take the boy's attention.

However, becoming friends or not was another story. To the girls, Miu's presence was just too dazzling, causing them to lose any courage to even stand by her side, as though they were people from completely different worlds.

"Miu-chan! Please clear things up with this guy, he'll give up if so!"

"You're celebrating Christmas with me, right? Miu-chan."

"No, it's me!"

Miu gave the clamoring boys a rather regretful look.

"I'm sorry, I already decided to celebrate Christmas with my family."

" " "H- How can this be……" " "

She gave the forlorn boys an extremely radiant smile and repeated it again in her heart: I'm happy that you are willing to ask me this, but I already decided to celebrate Christmas with my ever important family.

Miu couldn't help but feel grateful for Santa Claus for being able to end the year full of hardships with that sentence.

As I ended Oba-san's lifestyle inspection and 'special cooking lesson for the day', I printed out the reports that I just finished and hurried to the college to hand it in. After that, I went home directly without even having energy remaining to show up at Roary.

That moment, my lethargy was already overwhelming. I tossed my bag to the floor and collapsed directly onto the living room sofa.

“I- I’m tired to death……”

As soon as I closed my eyes, I sank into a slumber without further ado.

I wasn’t sure how long I slept on the sofa.

“Onii-chan? You’re asleep?”

“It seems like he’s already asleep, since Oji-san looked quite tired in the morning as well.”

…… It was Sora-chan and Miu-chan’s voices.

When my consciousness was still hazy, I heard two familiar voices, a happy feeling welling up in my heart at the same time.

“Oi-tan is seeping~”

Ngh.

“Ah! Hina, don’t do that! You can’t pinch Oji-san’s nose!”

“Oh~”

Unknowingly, it seemed like it was already the time for their return.

“Nimura-san said that doing the reports is quite tiring. Onii-chan probably didn’t have the time to sleep well as well…… Ah! Hina! You can’t just hug him!”

“Hina, Oji-san is sleeping! You can’t disturb him.”

“Okay~”

In my hazy consciousness, I really wanted to stay in that comfortable space, but I still struggled to chase away that desire and opened my eyes. After all, I have to stand up and welcome them home properly.

“Wel….. come, hoo~……”

I couldn’t speak properly.

“Welcome home.”

After standing up and repeating my words, the three gave me different responses.

“Onii-chan, you’ll get a cold if you sleep here.”

“Your hair is messy, Oji-san.”

“Good morning! Oji-san!”

I hugged Hina who sat down on my belly and raised my upper torso.

“As Oba-san came to teach today, I’ve already finished making dinner. Today, we’re having chikuzen-ni, boiled green beans, and tofu with meat floss.”

Although blowing one’s trumpet isn’t really nice, I think I did quite well. It’s all thanks to Oba-san.

“Uuu…… Onii-chan seems to be improving quicker than me……”

For some reason, Sora-chan muttered at a side with a convoluted expression. The living room was filled with friendly laughter. This kind of atmosphere is so nice. That moment, I suddenly thought of something. It was a great chance.

“Um…… Since everyone is here, I have something to ask you.”

I declared solemnly. Although I was troubling myself over this for a long time, I can’t drag this on anymore.

After all, Raika-san can't help me out regarding this, so I can only choose to face in from the front.

"Christmas is almost here. Hina, what present do you want Santa Claus to give to you?"

Miu-chan might still believe that Santa Claus exists, and although Sora-chan probably knows already, I am sure that Hina most probably believes in Santa Claus still.

So, I thought that it would be best for me to ask like this. As expected, Sora-chan turned her gaze to me after glancing at Hina, and seemed to have understood what I meant.

"T- That's right, you'll have to ask for a present from Santa Claus. Well then, what do you want, Hina?"

"Uuu~ Hina wants…… Mr. Bunny!"

Hina spoke loudly while raising the bunny doll in her hand.

"Eh? You want another one?"

"Mr. Bunny's friend~!"

Ah, I see. So Hina wants Mr. Bunny number two?

"What about Sora-chan?"

"…… I- I'm fine with anything…… As long as Onii…… Wait, as long as Santa Claus…… gives me something…… Anyway, anything would do."

Seeing Sora-chan answer like that with her face red, I moaned in my heart. So she's letting me decide?

That would be more troublesome.

“Um, what about Miu-chan, then?”

“Eh~ What should I choose…… Let me think for awhile~ ♪ Or perhaps I should leave this for Santa Claus Oji-san to decide?”

It seemed like Miu-chan’s Christmas present might be in my hands as well. But I asked exactly because I was unsure of what girls at Miu-chan and Sora-chan’s ages would want.

If so, I should just ask Oba-san instead. After all, she was once a ten and fourteen years old girl as well. Wait a minute, how many years was that again? I could almost hear Nimura do a tsukkomi on me from afar, but currently, I just need a person to depend on.

In any case, I’ll discuss things with her the next time she comes. I thought with a sliver of hope.

However, Oba-san did not come after that.

Even though she agreed to come over every three days, she never came although one week had passed, causing me to feel doubt.

“…… That’s strange.”

At first, I had a message from Oba-san that she couldn’t come over temporarily because of some matters, but one week passed just like that. To be frank, I would be very nervous when Oba-san comes over for spot checks, and I would even feel impatient sometimes about her despairing nagging.

However, ever since Oba-san came over to teach Sora-chan and I how to cook every three days, even preparing dishes for us after that, my fear towards her gradually weakened. The fact that a person that does things by the book like Oba-san didn’t come made me even more worried.

"…… Oi-tan, Oba-tan hasn't come~"

Sitting on the sofa in the living room Hina placed Mr. Bunny on her lap and said in a somewhat lonesome manner.

"I can already cook the stewed meat with potato that Oba-san taught me before this quite well, but……"

"I've got a bit tired of that dish now. It'll be better if Oba-san could teach Onee-chan some new dishes."

Sora-chan and Miu-chan felt regretful for Oba-san's absence as well. Seeing them in this state made me come to a resolution, and since the peak of my report completion had just ended, so I had quite a lot of time on my hands.

"Since tomorrow is a Sunday, let's go visit Oba-san together."

After hearing my proposal, the three sisters' eyes lit up.

We took the train from Ikebukuro station.

Along the way, we changed from the faster train to the slower train that stopped at each station, using twenty minutes in total to arrive at the outskirts of Tokyo, and finally arrived here.

"It would take at least forty five minutes counting from the time we got out…… That's about how long it is."

I felt that it was a distance that was neither far nor near.

"Um…… As I recall, it's probably this place."

I actually thought of calling her before visiting, but her cellphone seemed to be switched off, while nobody picked up the phone in her house. Since it

turned out like that, my originally doubtful emotions turned into worry, so we went for a sudden visit in the end.

"…… Eh?"

"Is this it……? Sahara Yoshiko…… That's right, this is the place."

But after seeing the building before us, all of us were dumbstruck.

The building located on the map was far older than we had imagined.

"Although it still doesn't count as a broken down apartment, however……"

"It's like our old house~"

That's right, that was what I thought. That place reminded me of the apartment that Nimura is staying at now, and they're almost exactly the same, except for the fact that the apartment that Oba-san was living at seemed even older. In any case, that was how it is.

"It's quite unexpected. It's somewhat different from the impression Oba-san gives us."

Miu-chan spoke out the thought that we were thinking.

"Nn, I'm a bit surprised as well. To be honest, it's the first time I came to Oba-san's house as well."

It was an apartment with two floors. Although the stairs outside had already rusted, piled up fallen leaves and trash were nowhere to be seen outside, so that place was probably cleaned up on a set basis, an apartment that still had people taking care of it even though it looked old.

"Um…… Number five…… of the second floor?"

I walked up the stairs and knocked on the door with the doorplate 205.

“Oba-san, are you home? I’m Yuuta.”

Nobody answered.

“Oba-san, this is Sora, Takanashi Sora.”

“I’m Miu, Oba-san, are you home?”

“Oba-ta~n~ ♪”

The three of them extended their cute hands to knock on the door.

However, there was still no response, but this time, sounds could be heard coming from the room.

“Oba-san? Are you in there? Oba-san, I’m Yuuta!”

It would be really embarrassing if I made a mistake, but I still decided to knock on the door once more. Just when I was raising my hand, the handle of the door started to move before my eyes, and the person who appeared after the door opened was Oba-san, who was dressed in cotton pajamas and a ice pack. By the way, the cotton pajamas had a pink background and pictures of yellow chicks.

We finally understood that Oba-san, who was wearing cotton pajamas that seemed to suit Hina’s interests, fell sick at home, as we was worried of.

“You should have contacted us earlier.”

“It’s just a slight fever, so it’s fine. You don’t need to be so worried.”

Oba-san said while planning to pack away the futon on the floor. When they saw that, Sora-chan and Miu-chan immediately halted Oba-san’s hands from both sides.

“Oba-san, don’t push yourself. You should be lying down instead.”

“That’s right, Oba-san.”

“How can I lie down with guests here?”

Although Oba-san spoke in a stern tone as usual, a patient wearing cotton pajamas with pictures of chicks would only make the dignity unconvincing. Sora-chan and Miu-chan stopped Oba-san half by coaxing, half by force.

“Please don’t worry about this and lie down. Since you have a fever, you can’t get up even more. We usually let you see many embarrassing sides of us already.”

“What does a small matter like this matter…… Oof!”

Oba-san’s ragged breathing showed the fact that she still had a fever.

Seeing Oba-san like that, Sora-chan and Miu-chan forcibly chivvied her back to her bed without further ado.

Compared with the house that we lived in before this, it was about one room larger at most, while the kitchen was just separated from the living room with a glass door. There was another room separated by a paper door as well. Now that there was a futon spread at the very center of the living room, the presence of the four of us and Oba-san caused the place to appear even more cramped.

“…… If I knew that you would come, I would have slept in the bedroom. As I live alone, it’s nearer to the kitchen like this, so it’s more convenient……”

As she spoke in a more harried manner than usual, she seemed to feel rather awkward as she spoke.

Oba-san probably felt that sleeping in the living room in a futon looked rather slovenly, but convenience is the most important thing when one's body is sick, so she really needn't mind at all.

"Oba-tan has a fever? Hot? Hina will help Oba-tan, 'Pain pain go away'~"

Hina extended her small hand towards Oba-san, who was in the futon, making the action of chasing away the fever from her forehead.

"Let me make some porridge."

"Onee-chan, I'll help out as well."

The two sisters determinedly stood up. I handed the kitchen to them and allowed Hina to side by my side, looking at the condition around Oba-san after that.

There was a box of ice packs by Oba-san's pillow, along with a hot water bottle containing tea and a cup. However, judging from the empty state of the ice pack box, Oba-san had probably been lying home for a whole week now.

"Did you eat properly?"

"…… I have been eating, so don't worry."

"We could've got something over as long as you mentioned this to us."

"It's just a small matter, there's no need to call you over."

Although Oba-san was as stubborn as ever, compared with her usual gaze while looking at us, she seemed to be much gentler.

"It often turned out like this if I fall sick when the seasons change. Even though it would be hard to go by at first, only a fever will be left after some time, and I'll get better just by lying down."

“But……!”

“Compared with me, Yuuta-san, you should’ve thought more clearly about bringing the children over. If I caught influenza, it’s very possible that they might be infected. You should have at least brought a face mask.”

Ah, I was too careless.

“Goodness gracious……”

Oba-san sighed in her futon, and seemed to be somewhat disappointed.

However, she looked at me with an affectionate gaze after that.

“However…… Thank you for worrying for me.”

“Eh?”

“Although it’s just a cold, it’s quite tiring when one is unable to move due to fever. It’s quite comforting for someone to be concerned for me at this time.”

“After this, please contact me if you’re in any trouble. Let me help. Besides, we’re living quite close to you as well…… Ah, Oba-san, is it okay that you didn’t contact your children?”

Well, perhaps I should call them my cousins.

“There is no such need, as they are currently out of Japan.”

“They went overseas? Did they go for a holiday or for a business trip?”

“Both are incorrect. They are working overseas. Both of my children are working for a foreign-funded enterprise, and were posted to the headquarters overseas in the end. They seem to be quite busy, and might not even come back every two years.”

Hearing the fact that I was never aware of, my eyes widened in surprise.

“After all, they’re more than ten years older than Yuuta-san…… Speaking of which, it doesn’t seem like you have many chances to meet. When Yuri-san got married, the both of them were still overseas, so they didn’t take part, and even their own wedding ceremony was held overseas, so I was the only person from Japan who took part.”

Speaking of which, the opportunities for my relatives and I to meet were only occasion of marriage or death.

When I thought of that, being able to meet Oba-san frequently like this made me feel that it was quite wondrous.

Miu-chan and Sora-chan were doing their best to cook in an unfamiliar kitchen. The fragrance drifting over from the kitchen made me understand that they weren’t just making porridge.

“Ah! The eggs already expired.”

“It’s fine if it only expired for a day or two.”

“That won’t do. Oba-san, it might be fine when you’re healthy, but it definitely won’t do when you’re sick.”

Miu-chan said unhesitatingly.

“Onee-chan, I’ll go buy some fresh ones immediately, so wait for me awhile.”

“I’m counting on you, Miu.”

Seeing Miu-chan, who planned to run out just like that, I hastily halted her.

“If so, I’ll go out then.”

“Mnn~ Would that be fine?”

“What is there to worry about? I’m just going to buy some eggs.”

“Ahaha! I was just joking! But since you’re going out, I have some other things to buy as well. Oji-san, can you buy them along the way?”

“No problem.”

Miu-chan speedily wrote out a note with a smile, and among them were sports drinks, bottled water, nutrient pills, flu medicine, and what seemed to be vegetables to be eaten with the porridge. I could see the results of what Miu-chan learnt when Sora-chan got sick before this.

“They might be slightly heavy. Sorry for that, Oji-san ♪”

“…… I’m going out now.”

I went out holding the note that contained a startlingly large amount of groceries.

When I returned while holding a full bag that was almost sinking into my skin, the porridge had just been finished.

At the same time that I opened the door, the fragrance puffed into my nose.

“Oh my….. It’s delicious.”

“Well, Oba-san taught me before this that porridge will only be tasty if you cook it starting from the rice.”

“So you did master it. Thank you.”

“…… Ah, not really.”

“Oba-tan! Do your best! You’ll have to eat lots of it!”

Oba-san, who was sitting up on her futon, seemed to be satisfied with the porridge that Sora-chan and Miu-chan made, while Hina and Mr. Bunny was cheering on Oba-san as she continued to eat.

“I’m back. Did I come back with the eggs too slowly?”

“I’ll make egg porridge after this, so it’s fine, Onii-chan.”

Hearing Sora-chan say that, I placed the eggs that I just bought into the fridge. The fridge looked like it went through a huge spring-cleaning, as almost nothing was left in it. That made me fully understand that Oba-san couldn’t go out to buy anything at all while she was sick.

When I saw that Oba-san almost finished her porridge, I opened the canned peach that I bought. That would be a traditional patient’s meal. Oba-san looked somewhat surprised, but she still started to eat in satisfaction after taking the can of peaches in sweet syrup.

“Oi-tan! Hina too!”

And of course, Hina’s request was in my calculation, so I already bought two.

After opening the can of peach for Hina, Sora-chan and Miu-chan, a sweet fragrance wafted in the room.

“Cooking can only be counted as complete after the cleaning is done.”

That was Oba-san’s stern teachings.

The small kitchen seemed to be rather crowded as not only Sora-chan and Miu-chan, but even Hina went over to have a look. Even though I said that I wanted to help out, I was chased out as it was already full.

Seeing everyone’s efforts, Oba-san suddenly spoke:

“Are you surprised that this house is so small and dingy?”

“Eh? W- Why would we?”

“You don’t need to be polite. After all, this IS a small and dingy apartment. You may remember that my husband passed away shortly before your parents, right? That time, my youngest child was a college student as well, so it was a time when money was needed in many aspects. That was why I hurriedly moved to this house where the rent was cheapest, and I lived here since then.”

Oba-san said in slight nostalgia.

“…… That time, if I had just a bit more power, I probably could’ve taken in you and Yuri-san. Seeing you now makes me feel that things might have been different if I worked harder that time.”

“Eh? Oba-san, you’re referring to……”

“I think it’s all thanks to your great efforts of wanting to protect them that the three sisters can live together right now. Even though you often hear people saying ‘when there’s a will, there’s a way’, putting it in practice is actually quite hard.”

Oba-san looked at me with a gentle smile. All of a sudden, her smile overlapped with that of my sister’s in my mind.

Even though their features weren’t alike, for some reason, I just felt like the smile on Oba-san’s face looked extremely similar to that of Nee-san’s.

“I think that there are probably quite a lot of aspects that you can’t handle right now, and living together means that you have to deal with each other’s troubles as well. However, if you are still willing to live together even so, you can probably bring happiness to each other.”

Oba-san spoke while looking at the Sora-chan and Miu-chan’s silhouettes in the kitchen. Hina was playing around their legs as well.

“Stop that, Hina, the bubbles would splatter around~”

“Nee-tan, bubbles ♪”

“No~ Hina~!”

The scene of the three sisters having fun together was commonly seen in the Takanashi residence.

But the said ‘commonly seen’ is actually an extremely precious thing.

“You did very well.”

The gentle words struck a cord in my heart.

However, before the emotion faded, Oba-san still gave me a warning.

“…… Even so, you still can’t live a messy life, especially regarding your meals. If they aren’t handled properly, they might affect everything. Of course, cleaning up after everything is important as well, and aren’t your socks almost having holes on them? You’ll have to take care of your clothing properly. Speaking of which, your messy appearance in the morning some time before this…… Hey! Yuuta-san! Are you listening?”

Although Oba-san switched to nagging mode halfway through, I think that not only can I listen to Oba-san’s scolding properly, traces of a smile could be seen on my lips as well.

Listening to Oba-san nagging Yuuta, sounding almost like background music, the hearts of the three sisters in the kitchen felt a hint of warmth. Sora felt mystified about that as well.

Actually, Oba-san is quite a stern person, and would make Sora extremely nervous whenever they meet.

However, although this isn't a particularly beautiful apartment, Oba-san's apartment gave off a warm presence, just like the apartment at Hachiouji that they dearly missed.

"…… Onee-chan, do you still remember?"

Miu whispered by Sora's side while Hina was playing with bubbles around them.

"When Yuri-san just came, I accidentally drank a bottle of Papa's beverage that he left around for a few days, giving me a huge stomachache, and causing her to be angry at him…… That incident."

"Nn, I remember. Yuri-san looked quite scary when she was angry."

"Even so, she was really thoughtful to us…… She really….. cared for us from the bottom of her heart."

"Yeah. After all, Yuri-san was Hina's mother."

Not knowing if Hina heard her sister's conversation or not, she continued to battle the bubbles.

"They just feel……. Similar."

The stern voice that always made them feel warm in their heart made Miu remember the feeling.

"…… Nn, yeah."

"Hina likes Oba-tan. Oba-tan, Oba-tan, look, Hina made Mr. Bunny!"

Hina's innocent words, or perhaps the simplest and most correct answer.

Although the people important in their lives won't return after they lost them, they still felt happy that they had someone who allowed them to visit her when she was sick.

Considering that we might make Oba-san even more tired if we stay too long, we left after about an hour. The three sister's unwilling expression when we were about to leave left a deep impression on me.

"Oba-tan says that she would come over after this, yay~ ♪"

Hina moved her hand that wasn't held in excitement.

I thought about it for awhile and nodded.

"That's right, Hina. Oi-tan hopes for Oba-san to get well sooner and come to our house as well."

In the past, I might not have had such a thought, but the emotion right now is unmistakable.

Even in the past, I understood that Oba-san nagged us for our rake, but I just couldn't rid the feeling that I was on surveillance. However, the feeling that Oba-san gave me that day was different, and I'm not referring to the fact that Oba-san lacked energy as she lied on the bed……

"After all…… We're family."

The words slipped out of my mouth.

"I probably like Oba-san as well."

Sora-chan said with a smile.

"When Yuri-san was here, I almost never helped her cook, so…… It feels like I was taught by Mama when Oba-san taught me to cook…… I like it."

"Yeah….. It's…… a strange, nostalgic feeling."

Miu-chan added. I could understand their feelings more or less. Oba-san, who spoke to me of the past, made me remember Nee-san as well. Possibly because she was feeling bored, Hina started to express her opinions as well.

“Hina wants to learn to cook too!”

“Isn’t it a bit early for you?”

“Hina wants~ And then, when Papa and Mama are back, Hina will cook for them ♪”

I was dumbstruck. And just when I was unable to respond immediately, Miu-chan held Hina’s hands moving in excitement.

“Hina, you’re not letting us eat them? That’s so means~”

“I will!”

“Nn! That’ll be great ♪””

“That’ll be great~ ♪”

Hina hugged Miu-chan’s leg and imitated her.

“Stop that, it’s hard to walk.”

Miu-chan said while holding Hina’s hand, walking in front half skipping, half running.

“Oji-san! Onee-chan! We’ll leave you behind if you don’t hurry!”

After saying that, Miu-chan turned her head around slightly and gave a charming smile.

“But Onee-chan might like that better, right?”

“M- Miu!”

“Ahaha! I was just joking ♪”

Miu-chan seemed to have said something to Sora-chan that only they could understand, and judging from the situation, she was really going to run to the station with Hina without us.

“Ngh! Wait a minute! Miu!”

“Hurry up and follow!”

“Hurry up and forrow~”

While being hurried on by Miu-chan and Hina, we ran to the station as though we were playing a mystifying game of tag.

Some time after that, the matter of Sora-chan refusing to let us go to the Christmas concert was solved in a flash due to Oba-san’s involvement after she recovered.

“Christmas concert? Then we must go watch that.”

“…… O- Oba-san…….”

Oba-san said with a smile while sipping tea on the sofa in the living room, with an apron on her.

“Is that okay? Sora-san.”

“Ngh~!”

Sora-chan, who was in an apron as well, gripped her skirt with her whole face red.

It seemed like Sora-chan, whom we were unable to convince, couldn’t refuse Oba-san’s direct decision.

“I’m looking forward to it. Speaking of which, I only notice the marking on the calendar about the recent Christmases……”

“N- Ngggh…… Fine……”

Seeing the flushed Sora-chan nod, Oba-san smiled happily as well. Although Sora-chan was embarrassed to let us see her on the stage, she seemed happy that we were willing to watch her as well.

“Oba-san, we’ll be very busy on Christmas then. Having to go to Hina’s kindergarten in the day, and having to go to Sora-chan’s Choir Club concert right after that.”

“I shall take leave that day, so it’s fine…… Oh, speaking of which, what are you planning to do regarding Hina-san’s bento for her Christmas party?”

With a smile that would make people want to describe it as a sly smile, Oba-san looked at Sora-chan and I in turh.

Oh yeah, there’s still the matter of the bento.

The atmosphere tensed up. Because of Oba-san falling sick before this, we completely forgot about this.

“I’m making it.”

“I’m going to make it.”

Sora-chan and I spoke loudly at the same time. I don’t have any intention to give in regarding this matter.

“It seems like……. You’re quite stubborn regarding this problem.”

Oba-san pressed her finger between her brows, making an action that seemed to indicate that she was having a headache.

“Yuuta-san, why do you wish to make the bento so much?”

"…… N- Ngh~"

Even if I want to answer, it's somewhat hard for me to answer before the three sisters as well.

"Because I'm their guardian. Wasn't there a time when I didn't even notice right until Sora-chan fell sick because of my business? That's why……."

"Sheesh! Onii-chan! You're still mindful of that!? You don't need to be so concerned at all!"

Sora-chan glared at me unhappily.

"I already said that I would work hard, so isn't this fine!"

"But you still have the solo part for the Choir part, and you haven't let me see your grades as well."

"M- M- My grades are fine! I'm positive I'm getting in the school I want!"

Sora-chan shouted in slight surprise.

"I did take part in the morning exercise for the Choir Club properly, and Shiori-san is helping after school as well……"

"But……"

"No buts! Idiot Onii-chan! I want to make it!"

I really couldn't understand what Sora-chan wanted to say.

"But you fell sick just because of this! If the same thing happens again, I won't be able to face Nee-san and Nii-san! Besides, if you use the time before your practice to make the bento, won't you have no time to sleep!"

Look, no matter how you look at it, I'm the one who's more justified. However, Sora-chan just couldn't accept it at all, while Miu-chan shrugged

at a side in helplessness. It seems like I hadn't grasped the main point of the problem at all.

"Ah, I see."

Oba-san nodded slowly, and seemed to have understood the situation.

"I understand both of your justifications now. However, doesn't seem like the both of you are right."

Facing her calm accusation, we couldn't help but shudder.

Oba-san turned around and looked at our cute princess.

"Hina-san, whose bento do you wish to eat?"

Being asked such a question all of a question, it caused Hina, who was playing with Mr. Bunny, to be startled for a moment.

"Bento? Christmas bento?"

"Hina, Hina! You want Oji-san's, right!"

"Hina, Onee-chan will make a very tasty for you!"

Hina thought for awhile and said with a radiant smile:

"Mama! Hina wants Mama's bento!"

"…… Hina-san, this……"

Oba-san's face fell, as though she found that she said something that she shouldn't.

It was quite a reasonable answer, but we couldn't do anything about it.

Up till now, Hina still can't comprehend the fact that her parents are already not here, and we still didn't know how to tell her the truth.

“Hina, about this……”

When they were still flustered thinking of how to explain things to her, I went forward first and hugged Hina while saying:

“Is that so…… Oi-tan understands. But that might be too hard to accomplish, and Mama said that she can’t come on Christmas as well.”

“Uuu…… Oi-tan…… Really……”

Seeing Hina’s sorrowful look, I lifted her up.

“…… I’m sorry, Yuuta-san.”

“No, that’s okay. Please don’t be mindful.”

I said to Oba-san with a smile. Today, let’s just hold the matter about the bento for now.

That night, I went to the dark living room after getting Hina to sleep, and flipped through the photo albums.

I looked at the photos of the three sisters and Nee-san, thinking of checking out if there were any photos of bentos inside.

It’ll be great if I can find any clues to satisfy Hina’s hope, albeit a little…… That was what I originally thought.

“…… Have trouble sleeping?”

The one who arrived at the living room with deliberately light steps was Miu-chan.

“Nn~ Since I was busy completing reports, it seems like I’ve turned into a night owl.”

“Fufu! Lies.”

In a practiced way, Miu-chan flung her blonde hair and sat down by my side.

“Regarding the bento, I’m sorry that Onee-chan didn’t want to give in.”

“Eh? N- No, actually you don’t need to be so mindful of this, but…… Why is it, I wonder?”

“I probably know, but…… It’s not a reason that I can tell you about.”

“How can this be……”

“Hehe! You’re really lacking in the delicacy department for always relying on people, Oji-san.”

As I really wasn’t sure of the situation, I truly didn’t know what to do. Just at that moment, Miu-chan lowered her head slightly.

“Oji-san, can I go over there a little?”

“Eh?”

Before I even had the time to ask her about it, Miu-chan leaned her head on my shoulder.

“M- M- M- Miu-chan?”

“…… Sometimes, I think that Hina is so blessed to have so many people worry for her.”

“Eh!? B- But I care about Miu-chan a lot as well, you know!?”

“Hehe! I know. I don’t mean that.”

After saying that, Miu-chan extended her hand and started to flip through the photo album on my thigh.

“Having such happy memories…… and liking her mother so much, Hina must be very happy.”

I couldn’t see Miu-chan’s expression. That moment, she might even be shedding tears.

“Even though those are memories from before three, I wonder why I can’t remember anything at all.”

Miu-chan’s lonely voice moved my heart.

“My mother left when I was three, and after that…… we lost contact. However, I didn’t really feel lonely. After all, I really couldn’t remember anything.”

I finally understood the reason for Miu-chan not having photos of her three year old Shichi-Go-San.

However, that moment, I didn’t know what I could say to comfort her at all……

The next day, after I watched the three sisters leave as usual, I made a phone call to Oba-san.

“I have something to ask of you, Oba-san. I want to remake Nee-san’s bento.”

That was the result for my night-long thinking. I finally understood what sort of bento I should make for Hina.

Chapter 6 – The Anticipated Christmas

Elegant singing voices resounded between the school buildings in the morning.

Takanashi Sora stood in the center of the choir consisting of over ten people.

The one in charge of conducting was Okae Kiyomi, while Hanamura Youko was in charge of the accompaniment.

Sora was in charge of the soprano part, and the entire structure of the song was centered on her as well.

Looking at his beautiful classmate doing her best to sing with her face red in shyness, Maeshima Daiki's gaze was filled with admiration. Although Daiki was usually clumsy, he still took on the role of a part leader with his profound timbre.

The resonating harmony and the refreshing melody resounded in the music room—

"Okay! Stop, stop! Takanashi-san!"

"Y- Yes!"

Sora's body shook in shock and froze right on the spot as Kiyomi called her name all of a sudden.

"Seriously, you don't need to be so nervous. When you're starting the solo, and when your solo is ending, your voice is just too tense. Be more confident and sing it out loudly!"

"Sorry."

Although Sora felt downcast, she still understood why Kiyomi said so.

When she sang along with the voices around her in harmony, she wouldn't feel too nervous as she was not alone. That made Sora feel quite relaxed.

But when she entered the solo, only she was left. Although the accompaniment tune was still playing, if she goes out of tune even slightly, it would turn into a fatal wound that anyone could find out. Similarly, when the song returns to the choir part, as she felt much relieved, her voice would turn softer than before, or would be unable to sing properly.

"Your voice is there. You just need some courage!"

With a majestic pose, Kiyomi pointed at Sora with her conducting baton.

"You must have the self-consciousness that you are very cute! You're really cute! Super cute!"

"E- E- Ehhhhh!?"

Is this a new way of making fun of people? Thinking of that, Sora's face reddened in an instant.

"Hold your head high! Show me your confidence! Cute girls are invincible!"

"B- Buchou! Aren't you making Takanashi even more nervous like this! You're just too insensitive!"

Unusually, Daiki said something constructive, while Shuuji and Youko unusually agreed and nodded as well.

"Who's insensitive! Maeshima, isn't your tone unsteady halfway through as well! Don't just sing in an unbearably loud voice just because you're unbelievably dumb!"

"W- What do you mean by that! Didn't you say that my voice is reliable just yesterday!"

"Yesterday is yesterday! Today is today!"

Kiyomi firmly shifted her gaze upwards while arguing unreasonably.

“It’s just a few days away from Christmas! There’s no time for us to dilly-dally anymore! Okay! Youko-san, let’s start! We’re starting from the very start!”

The accompaniment tune rang again.

Sora breathed in deeply. After all, her family would be there.

She definitely wanted them to see her best side.

And also…… A certain scene surfaced in Sora’s mind, for instance, the scene of Raika and Yuuta standing side by side in the kitchen.

An emotion that was similar to anger boiled in Sora’s heart, filling her thoughts.

The bento as well, I’m definitely not yielding!

Although I’m not as good as Oba-san at cooking, and not as beautiful as Raika-san, as the eldest sister of the Takanashi family, the one best at helping Onii-chan out is definitely me!

Because it must be me! Such strong thoughts caused Sora’s gaze to be filled with energy.

“…… Aha, you’re getting more energetic. Good, good.”

Sora’s appearance caused Kiyomi to be satisfied, while Daiki and co. looked at them in slight worry.

Since it already reached the countdown stage to Christmas, I continued to go forward while being immersed in cooking, reports and shopping. The cooking would be for Hina's bento, and to improve our meals. The reports included the parts that I had to redo and the topics for New Year as well. On the other hand, the shopping was done to choose presents for the three sisters, senpai and the others.

Regarding the cooking part, I fell in dispute with Sora-chan, who just wouldn't give in for some reason, while Oba-san started to teach us while adjusting to the time Sora-chan was available.

It couldn't be helped. If the classes were only held in the day, it would definitely be more advantageous to me. Since Oba-san is a person who values equity, she wished to teach us at the same pace. As Oba-san's attitude softened slightly, it felt like the relationship between Sora-chan and Oba-san was much more harmonious. That could be said to be a blessing in disguise, I suppose.

In contrast, Raika-san volunteered to be my cooking teacher for the extremely simple reason of being 'very free'. In many aspects, it was quite a pleasing development to me.

Although we could already fetch Hina by ourselves in our current state, Shiori-chan still volunteered to help. Thanks to her, I could focus on cooking and my reports even more.

Just like that, Raika-san and I were headed towards a propositional challenge.

"Yuuta, why don't you try this?"

"Raika-san, thank you."

I tasted a mouthful of the hamburger steak with tomato sauce that Raika-san made.

With a slightly sour taste that was accompanied with garlic, it was a top-notch dish that would make people sink in its delicious taste. Even if one serves this at a high-class hotel, probably, nobody would have anything to say as well. I knew that Raika-san's cooking skills was good, but the level of her skill was just too shocking……

"It tastes good, very good……"

I frankly spoke out my thoughts, but Raika-san still stared unblinkingly at my eyes.

"But there's something wrong?"

"…….. Yeah. Isn't it supposed to be sweeter? Anyway, we don't need to be so concerned about this, since it's an ordinary homemade dish after all. Both the hamburger steak and the tomato sauce is too formal……"

"Is that so? That's hard……"

With a poker face as usual, Raika-san said with her hands crossed.

"I'm sorry. I know that a request like this without even preparing a sample is too much."

"That's fine, I'll try other ways."

Raika-san's expression did not have an ounce of change, and just stood before the minced meat once more.

We used daytime to make hamburger steak.

Actually, not only hamburger steak, but spaghetti, kinpira, *tatsuta-age*, dried meat and so on.

Which would be, the various dishes that Nee-san once made for my bento.

Hina has only one wish, which would be 'Mama's bento'.

When I think about it, no, even if I don't think about it, I should know that that should be so.

However, Nee-san isn't here anymore.

I don't even know how Nee-san learnt her cooking skills.

In fact, when we lived together, there was a period of time when I kept tasting terrible cooking, but in a flash, Nee-san's cooking suddenly turned for the better, and I don't remember having any problems about food ever again.

Right now, the most important thing is the taste that could once be tasted every day.

And the person most suitable for this would naturally be me, as I tasted Nee-san's cooking the longest.

It was in line with my aim of not increasing Sora-chan's burden as well, and could already be described with the word mission.

However, the inadequacies regarding the technical aspect was rather hard to overcome…… I wanted to ask for Oba-san's assistance at first, but unexpectedly, Oba-san was hesitant of the request.

"I can help you, but remaking it is quite difficult, because I almost never ate Yuri-san's cooking…… Besides, the ones that I make are self-learnt homemade dishes, so it's hard to say if I can help out regarding this matter."

Even so, Oba-san still continued to teach us, as though she was Sora-chan and my tutor.

And that moment, the person who promised to help out was Raika-san. After listening to me speak of the situation, she agreed to help without further ado.

“I once went for cooking lessons and bridal training. Quite experienced.”

Raika-san spoke with her poker face on, making me quite grateful. And of course, I had another helper as well.

“Mmm~ This is the taste of porcino mushroom, right? How exquisite.”

That person would be the ikemen making green pepper meatloaf at a side with a smile on his face, Nimura.

“Oda-senpai, can I eat some?”

“Please. Remember to put the rest into the fridge.”

Nimura directly started to eat the hamburger steak with tomato sauce. His exceptionally good-looking appearance just by standing there annoyed me to no end. I want to be a handsome man from birth as well…

“The tomato sauce is top-notch as well. Is consommé added as well? Is it *fond de veau*?”

“It’s dashi that I made from vegetables. Mirepoix of vegetables with skin. Hina’s health goes first.”

A conversation that only masters of cooking could understand. Looking at their unexpectedly happy look made me feel fortunate as well.

After Oba-san’s special training, I could already handle small jobs. So, different from the previous times, my handling of the ingredients, such as cutting the vegetables, was brought into play.

I’m not talking nonsense. My cabbage could be shredded to units of two centimeters, while I could slice off the skin of an apple without the skin breaking as well. Don’t tell me that even a primary school student knows this. I really gave it my all.

Apart from that, my most important job would be to provide insight and trying the food.

“How about this? Have you thought of anything?”

It was already the umpteenth time Nimura asked the question.

“Mnnn~ It feels like it should be a simpler taste…… This is more like something that could be found at high-class restaurants. Nee-san is more like a master who can cook good food very quickly.”

“Simple, quick. Got it.”

Raika-san seemed to have thought of something, and stared at the hamburger steak.

“Not using grinded toast powder, but normal flour, quick. Using only pepper and salt as seasoning, simple.”

…… Although it was quite accurate, it felt like there should be much more of a difference. You don’t need to think so logically, Raika-san.

“Remaking a homemade flavor is quite hard……”

“Yeah…… I never thought that it would be so troublesome as well.”

I sighed. I really wanted to viciously slap the me who didn’t help Nee-san cook.

Just when we were doing things like that, the ingredients were all used up.

I went to a supermarket nearby to stock up. Although I felt somewhat bad for asking them to help out from making the dishes to guarding my house, I just couldn’t poof out dishes repeatedly like them, so that couldn’t be helped as well.

As soon as I walked out of the entrance, I saw a familiar high school girl in front of her house.

“Ah…… Sora-chan’s uncle.”

“Shiori-chan, isn’t it about time for you to remember my name by now? I’m Yuuta. Yuuta.”

I’m really being looked down on.

“Ah…… W- Well then…… Um…… Yuuta-san?”

“Yes, yes. Remember that.”

Seeing Shiori-chan with her face red, I didn’t think much of it and just nodded while speaking.

“It seems like your house is quite crowded today as well. Is anyone fetching Hina-chan today?”

“Ah, there’s no problem for today. Some of my friends came to hang out. I’ll fetch her as soon as it’s four.”

“Is that so. What a pity.”

Oh, it seems like she became more direct. Her somewhat shy smile was a different kind of cuteness compared with the three sisters.

“Please send my regards to your mother.”

When I waved my hands, planning to leave, I was unexpectedly called by Shiori-chan.

“W- Wait a minute! Can I have a moment of your time?”

Shiori-chan breathed in deeply and looked around for a moment.

“Um…… I- Is there…… anything I can…… help out with right now?”

It was quite an unexpected request.

“W- Why……? Is anything wrong?”

“Nothing! If you don’t need help with anything, that’s fine as well!”

Shiori-chan’s whole face was red for some reason, and looked as though she wanted to run away.

Although I wasn’t sure of the reason, her panicked look was different from the feeling that she gives off, and was strangely cute.

That moment, I suddenly thought of something.

“Shiori-chan, if I mention your mother’s homemade dishes…… What would you think of?”

Seeing Shiori-chan’s confused look, I explained the reason to her in simple, concise terms.

That day, Miu chose a longer path to walk home from. She did not use the original path that would take ten minutes on foot, but waltzed to a shop selling imported accessories. It was a shop selling goods with reasonable prices that Miu liked quite a lot.

The shop employees admired Miu’s bright appearance as well, and often gave her some discounts, and would particularly give away samples to Miu when new stocks were in.

They seemed to think that allowing the beautiful blonde girl famous around that area to wear them would achieve a promotional effect.

“Welcome. What are you looking for today?”

A female employee that Miu knew well greeted her. Her red and white clothes seemed to be worn for the festive feeling of Christmas.

“I’m looking for presents. Um…… How many do I need again……”

Miu counted with her fingers. Sora, Hina and Yuuta must of course be included, and then there would be Oba-san, Raika-san, Nimura-san, Shiori-san, Shiori-san’s mother, and a certain club president that she supposed she should count in……

“Wow, you need quite a lot this year. Are you having a party?”

With a smile, the female employer picked out a few products suitable as presents. She was right. Before the previous year, Miu only bought presents for her family. Although something that was quite sorrowful happened that year, the people she had to give presents to increased instead.

The fact caused a hint of warmth to arise in Miu’s heart.

It was the same for Hina’s Shichi-Go-San. That day, although Hina did not have the company of her mother, similar to Miu, she still looked rather happy.

Miu had completely no memory of the Shichi-Go-San when she was three. There weren’t any photos at home, while Miu never asked her father about that as well. And when she was seven, she celebrated the festival with Yuri-san.

What kind of clothes do you want to wear? Yuri-san, who asked Miu the question, made a dress with a lot of laces for Miu, who told her that she wanted ‘A dress like Cinderella’s’. Miu still remembered that.

Before the shrine that had a lot of beautiful clothing dominated by kimonos, Miu looked exceptionally dazzling as she was dressed up like a princess.

It was a rather happy memory.

However, that important person isn't here anymore. Even though the sense of loneliness never disappeared from her heart, the thing that she should do is to continue with her life with a smile. That was what Miu thought.

Because the elders of our family is too strict…… In various aspects.

Miu smiled, as though she was tossing away the numerous thoughts surging in her heart.

"Yeah! There's going to be a party. Please pick presents that would surprise everyone!"

The female employer triumphantly gave Miu the thumbs up, and generously gave her discounts as well.

Hina was waiting for people to bring her home from the kindergarten.

Although it was rather cold outdoors, the playroom was quite warm. Waiting there before their parents finish working could almost said to be these children's job. Even though there was a few friendly caretaking teachers keeping Hina company, it was inevitable that she would feel slightly sad seeing her friends going home one after another with their family.

"Hina, what's wrong?"

"Nnn~ Nothing~"

The one playing with Hina was Katsuya. Although her Oi-tan didn't seem to like him, to Hina, he was a friend who accompanied her most often when the kindergarten reached closing time, and a close friend who would occasionally be taken care of by the Kitahara family as well.

"Hey, Hina. It's so good to be you."

Katsuya said all of a sudden.

“Why?”

“Only Daddy and Mommy fetches me home, but there are so many people to fetch Hina home.”

“Eh? Really?”

Hina asked with her head tilted. To the children at the kindergartener, it was a given that parents couldn’t fetch them because of work, so Hina’s condition of her parents not fetching her was thought to be because they were ‘always working’ as well.

It wasn’t because Yuuta and the others explained to Hina like that, but due to the fact that ‘not fetching’ was synonymous to ‘working’ at the kindergarten. For family with working parents, the children would often wait a long time before their family fetches them, just like Katsuya.

“But, I think it’s better to be Kacchan. Because, your Papa and Mama always comes.”

“Eh—? But, but, Hina always goes home first.”

Hina was surprised by his words. When even Shiori is included, Hina might be going home from the kindergarten unexpectedly early.

“Oh. Being Hina is better, huh?”

“Nn, yes, yes.”

A smile lit Hina’s face. She felt happy for being praised, and Hina understood that the somewhat blunt Katsuya tried to cheer her up by doing so as he saw that nobody came to fetch her after so long.

“Thank you~ Kacchan.”

“Hehe! Why?”

With a triumphant smile, Katsuya suddenly saw a marking on the calendar and said as though he suddenly thought of something:

“That’s right, Hina, what did you ask from Santa Claus? He’ll come to the kindergarten as well!”

“Eh! Santa Claus will come!?”

Hina started to ponder what she should ask for when Santa Claus arrives.

“Hehe, I have a good idea. Let’s write a letter to Santa Claus!”

The kindergarten teacher who heard the two’s conversation prepared drawing papers and crayons for them, and thus the children who were left at the kindergarten continued to think hard on what they wanted from Santa Claus.

The instant Hina took the paper, she immediately started to write without hesitation.

To Hina, there was only one thing that she wanted.

I, who bought a large amount of items to experiment on the cooking and for the ingredients for dinner, was walking on the road back home.

Buying things used up quite a lot of time, and it was about time for me to fetch Hina as well.

The kindergarten teacher had already remembered me, and she knew that our family is somewhat of a special case as well, so she was especially helpful to us.

I never thought that there would be a registration system for those who wanted to fetch children home from kindergarten. In this era, even when a grandmother related by blood wished to fetch a child, it seemed like kindergarten won't immediately allow that without confirmation. I heard that there were cases of kindergartens being affected by parents in the process of divorce due to parentship rights.

However, the rule was meaningless to us, as we requested beforehand for the kindergarten to allow everyone in our family, Oba-san and Shiori-chan's family to fetch Hina home. Although that seemed to be a special case, the kindergarten still agreed to our request.

"Oh, Hina, there's someone to fetch you."

A beautiful, friendly kindergarten teacher called Hina.

"Oi-tan!"

Hina energetically pounced onto me. Ah~ Happiness!

"Hina, were you a good girl today as well?"

"Nnn! Oi-tan! Hina wrote a letter to Santa Claus today!"

"Oh! Really! Where's the letter? Let Oi-tan post it for you right away!"

It was good news indeed. Although a bunny doll was the prime candidate, if I could see Hina's request for Santa Claus for certain, obliging to the request would be much easier. Good job, kindergarten.

"Hoho! We will only hand the letter to the guardian during the Christmas party."

There was a mischievous smile on the teacher's face. S- Seriously?

"It is the Director's policy that parents should think more of this, so he wishes for the parents to compare the answers only then."

Ngh…… So is this the legendary Guardians' Training!? How regretful……

"Oi-tan, let's go home! Hina is hungry!"

"Okay! After going home, we'll have dinner made by Raika-san and NImura, and it'll be so much that you can't finish them!"

"Eh? That's gweat!"

The adorable Hina pranced around happily like a bunny. Being able to express one's feelings frankly is a good thing as well.

However, I somehow felt that another problem regarding Christmas stacked up.

There was another visitor at the Takanashi residence that day.

"Why! Why why why! Oda-kun! Nimura-kun! Why am I the only one who cannot enter!"

"Because the house owner isn't present."

"Because we were requested to look after the house."

The person expressing his dissatisfaction at the doorstep was Shuntarou Sako.

"Isn't this the same as treating me as a suspicious person! Don't you two trust me at all?! I lowered my head to the professors in humility for Segawa-kun's sake to collect those reports! I know that I am unable to help out in cooking, so it can't be helped that I wasn't invited, but at least let me visit!"

"What should we do?"

Raika asked Nimura with a poker face.

"…… Um, we'd better not. If incidents like one of Miu-chan's panties getting missing after he goes home occur, the members of Roary would definitely be forbidden to visit."

"…… Kaichou, dirty."

"W- Wait! Wait a minute! N- Nimura-kun! The development of being judged to be guilty when a crime has yet to be committed should not be allowed in a nomocratic country where a jury system is starting to be used."

"…… Has yet to be?"

"Ahhhhh! Oda-kun! Exploiting flaws in one's usage of words is just too despicable! I- I just…… want to bring this over!"

Sako, who looked sad for being isolated, took out a certain item.

"Ah…… This is……!"

And Sako was indeed holding something that would be needed in his hands.

Sora was still in her special training at school.

Although she was quite mindful of the matter of the bento, she couldn't be careless with her club as well. After all, the solo part was to be the climax of the concert.

"It just feels somewhat imperfect."

The club president, Kiyomi, hugged her arms solemnly, while Sora agreed with her as well.

“Why, I wonder. It just feels like your original potential hasn’t been expressed.”

When the other members had returned, the trio that included Youko remained at school to continue practice, but for some reason, Kiyomi wore an expression of being unable to accept Sora’s singing voice.

Youko could understand Kiyomi’s dissatisfaction, and knew that Sora was trying hard to practice as well. The mature girl suddenly let out a sigh and stood up in front of the piano.

“Sora-san, do you like to sing?”

The sudden question caused Sora to be somewhat confused. She never thought that the matter would suddenly return to such a basic question.

“E- Erm…… Y- Yes.”

Although Sora’s voice diminished involuntarily, her words were true.

“Well then…… For whom do you sing for?”

“…… Eh?”

“Basically, songs are sung for certain people. I just feel that the current Sora-chan seems to be spinning around by herself.”

“Ah……”

Sora felt as though the problem in her heart was seen through…… Really? That might have been so.

“Nnn. And also, we wanted you to have the solo part, and it’s not like you snatched the part forcibly, so you can just relax a bit.”

Kiyomi added thoughtfully, while Sora lowered her head in embarrassment.

Both the matters about her family and her club wasn't forced on her by anyone, so perhaps she really did worry too much about them?

When Sora stood up once again from her shame, she told Kiyomi and Youko with her head lowered:

"Please allow me to try again."

Even if that was really true, no matter what the original reason was, the one who decided to do it was she herself.

Facing Sora's reaction that was unclear whether she did understand or not, the two gave a wry smile at the same time—

A beautiful singing voice rang in the music room once again along with a gentle accompaniment.

"Ah, it started again. Takanashi…… Her voice is really beautiful."

"Yeah, Speaking of which, Daiki, isn't it about time for you to go back as well? It turned cold already."

As a large crowd would make Sora nervous, Daiki and Shuuji were chased out of the music room.

Although Shuuji wished to go home earlier as well, Daiki didn't seem to want to leave the singing voice.

"Just a moment, a moment more would be enough."

Through the window separating the music room and the corridors, Daiki spied on Sora's silhouette while trying not to be noticed.

Sora, who was focused on the concert, looked like the most beautiful girl in the world in Daiki's eyes.

The sweet and sour emotions that welled up in his heart and the coming Christmas caused him to be extremely excited.

“I say…… Takanashi…… What would she like? And what kind of present would she want……”

At least, I want to give her a present like Santa Claus. Just thinking of that is okay, isn’t it? Daiki thought in his heart.

Cheering for the beautiful girl always worked hard and stirred up sympathy in people’s hearts.

“…… Actually, Takanashi-san seemed to have chatted with Hanamura-san about cooking. They seemed to be talking about food in bento that mothers make. You do remember Hina-chan, whom we had seen some time before this, right? Takanashi-san seems to be having a headache about her little sister’s bento. And her mother isn’t here anymore as well……”

Just hearing that caused Daiki to be able to contain himself. He recalled the two cute younger sisters of the Takanashi family, the three sisters who never forgot to smile even though they were facing a cruel predicament.

“Bento, huh……”

Daiki’s words caused a bad feeling to arise in Shuuji’s heart.

When we reached home, what awaited us was the cooking that Raika-san and Nimura worked hard to make.

And also, Sako-senpai, who appeared from god knows when.

“Wow, wow! Is Raika-chan a magician!?”

“Only for Hina, I can use any magic no matter what it is.”

The voracious three year old whose eyes sparkled due to the plentiful cooking before her eyes and the striking beauty who couldn't contain herself whenever she sees cute things embraced each other. Although it was quite a nice scene, Sako-senpai, who was on the floor, was seriously an eyesore.

"Senpai, why are you sitting on the floor?"

"…… They did not allow me to leave their range of vision, but since it's better than standing outdoors in December to await your return, this is still acceptable. In any case, I have already heard of your predicament. It seems to be quite troublesome."

"Nnn…… Ah! Don't talk about this over here, Hina will hear it."

"But of course, I, Shuntarou Sako, definitely won't do anything to spoil a young girl's happiness!"

Hmm…… That's true.

"Disregard those matters for the moment. Actually, I have something to discuss with Segawa-kun who is held in high regard as the future leader of us Roary. I have come today just for this reason."

Sako-senpai approached while kneeling on the floor and came closer to my ears. It felt extremely disgusting.

"I- Is there anything wrong?"

"What are you saying! Do you even need to ask? It's regarding Christmas, of course. About the Christmas present that Miu-sama wishes to have, do you have any information about that? Do not worry, I will not forget you for this. I have here a photo album of Oda-kun at a swimming pool when she was still a first year…… What do you think?"

…… Senpai, this is an underground deal! I cannot do a thing like this.

“What is the resolution? I’ll have to take a look at that first.”

Whoops! Uh oh, I mixed up the things that I could only think in my heart and what I should have said.

“Fufufu! You’re really quite sly as well. Very well, from the SD card, I shall first……”

“W- Wait a minute! No, that’s not it! I’m being troubled over the three sisters’ presents as well!”

“Sheesh, you’re really useless. Segawa-kun, for what did you live together with them?”

At least, I didn’t do it to expose information about Miu-chan to Sako-senpai.

“Ah~…… The present that would make Miu-sama and Hina-sama the happiest must be give by me and only me. To express my undivided loyalty, I should order a gown suitable for Miu-sama……”

“Um…… I think Miu-chan should be a more practical person.”

It’s like that in reality as well. When I think about it, I have never heard of Miu-chan making stubborn requests. Even if she said that she wanted to eat sushi, we would just go to sushi-go-round shops at most, and it might have even been even cheaper than some restaurants, and even if she asked for pocket money, those money would later turn into expenses for dinner as well.

She’s a thoughtful child….. As Miu-chan’s appearance was quite striking, it might not be easy to see it, but I think she is a very good, considerate child.

It was the same on that night some time before this…… I recalled the feeling of Miu-chan leaning on my shoulder that day.

The light body with a slight fragrance, and the voice that had a hint of loneliness.

'I really don't remember at all.'

That was what she said. Although I couldn't see her expression, I am certain……

"…… Senpai, I have a good idea…… Are you willing to take part?"

Without much thought, the words slipped out of my mouth naturally.

"Oho! Of course, of course, of course! As expected of the future leader of us Roary!"

Seeing Sako-senpai's delighted look, Nimura approached curiously as well.

That might have been just a misunderstanding on my part. Although it might be a misunderstanding……

Even if it fails, it would be a memory as well. Isn't that just fine?

I was quite satisfied with my idea, and thus one of my problems was solved.

Regarding the presents for the three sisters, there was two left.

" "We're back!" "

The ones who greeted at the same time as they reached home were Sora-chan and Miu-chan.

"Welcome home. You came back together."

"Yeah, we met on the road coincidentally."

Miu-chan answered with a cheery smile as usual, while Sora-chan looked rather weary.

“Thanks for your hard work. Come have dinner. Just pick whatever you like to eat.”

Raika-san spoke while pointing at the sumptuous dishes in the kitchen.

And for some reason, Sora-chan, who saw Raika-san and I dining shoulder by shoulder, had her face filled with anger.

“Ah! So devious……”

She’s probably referring to Hina’s bento, huh? I couldn’t help but smile wryly.

“Nothing. Although we did so much, we still couldn’t replicate Nee-san’s taste. It’s so difficult.”

Even though Sora-chan, who forcefully turned her fact to a side, was quite exhausted, she still stood up and grabbed her apron.

“Raika-san, although Oba-san should be arriving soon…… Please teach me to cook as well.”

“Not a problem. Sora-chan, what do you want to make?”

“…… I like the steamed red wine chicken that Yuri-san used to make, but Oba-san doesn’t seem to make that often.”

“Got it.”

After saying that, Raika-san quickly started to organize the ingredients.

Even though she just ended her club activities and hadn’t rested yet…… When I thought of that, I walked to Sora-chan’s side.

“Sora-chan, you’re already tired, so you can’t force yourself too much.”

“Onii-chan, stop interfering.”

Sora-chan's words were quite harsh, and seemed to have a hint of enmity.

I was truly worried of her…… That caused me to be somewhat annoyed.

"Okay, okay, Onee-chan and Oji-san should both calm down."

Miu-chan spoke with a troubled expression.

However, I definitely won't step back, because Sora-chan is starting to force herself again.

"If so, Sora-chan will collapse in exhaustion again. Even if Sora-chan doesn't force herself, I can do things by myself, and everyone can help as well, that's why……"

"…… I…… I want to do it!"

Sora-chan loudly interrupted my words.

"Sora-chan……"

Just when I was about to retaliate, the electric bell at the entrance rang once more.

"Ah, the bell rang. It should be Oba-san. Will you please go have a look, Oji-san?"

"…… Nn."

I had no other choice but to walk towards the entrance.

Shiori-chan and her mother stood at the entrance.

"Hehe! I heard from Shiori that you wanted to know about a mother's taste, so I came over."

Mrs. Kitahara wore a friendly smile on her face while she held a few containers in her hands.

“I tried to make something that Hina would like, so you can see if you can check this out as reference.”

Shiori-chan handed the containers and detailed recipes to me.

That moment, I noticed that there were a few more band-aids on Shiori-chan’s hands.

“Eh……? These band-aids are……”

“Ah- Ahaha…… I- It’s nothing!”

“Hoho! She doesn’t usually help out when I ask her to, so I wonder what’s wrong with her today. Ever since we were asked to take care of Hina-chan, quite a lot of good things happened.”

Hearing her words, Shiori-chan puffed out her cheeks in displeasure.

“Mom! Don’t just say anything you like! …… However, I do still need to apologize to Sora-chan.”

“Why?”

“I…… Even though I never tried it before, I told her, ‘You can take care of both the housework and your club’. But in truth, I only found out how tough it is after trying to cook for real…… I shouldn’t have said things like that as I like.”

“Ohh…… So something like that happened.”

But that wasn’t Shiori-chan’s problem, but rather, because I was just too unreliable.

“Thank you all, Mrs. Kitahara, Shiori-chan. We’re in your care after this as well.”

I told the both of them in a deep bow. My neighbors who wore friendly smiles caused a hint of warmth to trickle into my heart.

“So it turned out like this? It doesn’t seem like we can put these into the refridgerator.”

After Shiori-chan and her mother went home, Oba-san, who arrived closely after that, said in slight surprise.

“Such a big feest~ ♪ Just like a restaurant~ ♪ Res, res, restaurant~ ♪”

The pretty little girl of our family who was writing the lyrics for her restaurant song was not conscious of the reason things turned out like this.

Dishes that could be used for bentos filled both the kitchen and the living room.

There was a particularly large variety of experimental dishes of Hina’s favorite hamburger steak.

If we count the dishes that the Kitahara family sent over, there were even more dishes. Well, Hina was quite happy, but we were rather helpless.

“Well then, did you manage to recreate Yuri-san’s taste?”

“…… Well…… I’m somewhat confused. Although Yuri-san’s dishes were really tasty……”

“All of us tasted it, but it just felt different. If it were to be Hina, she should be able to distinguish it right away.”

“Although we already tried hard…… it seems like all of them just weren’t right. Even though there isn’t too much of a difference in the ingredients from the fridge.”

"…… So it still can't be helped in the end, huh. Can't I take Yuri-san's place at all?"

I couldn't help but ask after hearing Sora-chan's words:

"Sora-chan, what did you say just now?"

It was something that I couldn't just overlook after hearing.

"Eh? What's wrong? Onii-chan, don't make such a scary expression!"

"Sora-chan, I never wished for you to be Nee-san's replacement."

"I- I know!"

The gazes of everyone in Roary, Oba-san, Miu-chan and the others were focused on me.

But even so, I still didn't let the matter drop. It wasn't something that one should easily dismiss.

I'm Sora-chan's Papa, after all.

"Sora-chan, I understand that you worked hard, but…… Before that, I think it is more important for you to be a happy middle schooler. Just like…… any other people…… that's why……"

I really didn't know what to say.

However, it seemed to be the first time I was angry at Sora-chan.

Even though I wished for her to be happy, even though I became her Papa just for this reason.

I just wanted to give Sora-chan a normal life that any other middle schooler could have.

If I made her think that I just wanted a replacement for Nee-san, I won't be able to forgive myself for that.

"I…… As Papa…… I just want to give Sora-chan a normal happiness……"

My muddled thoughts slipped out of my mouth just like that.

While Sora-chan stared at me while biting her lip.

Her large eyes were filled with tears.

"…… I…… I don't care about that in the least! Onii-chan, don't just decide things by yourself!"

Miu-chan, Hina and everyone else gazed at Sora-chan.

She shouted loudly as she tried not to let her tears flow out:

"I…… I just want to be of help! Just let me do it!"

Sora-chan's emotions poured out.

"Just let me do it…… My normalcy…… is when I'm needed by everyone in the family…… and to be a good sister……"

I didn't know what to say.

How can this be……? I didn't want Sora-chan to push herself so much…… However, it caused her to suffer instead?

And it was exactly because of that that Sora-chan was so stubborn about Hina's bento?

When I think about it, it was the same for me. Squabbling with Sora-chan…… so that I could be a good Papa.

The doubts that I had finally disappeared from my heart.

Why did Sora-chan turn so obstinate?

That was probably the feeling of her job being snatched away all of a sudden, huh?

I said nothing. Only Sora-chan's weak sobs could be heard in the house.

And the person who broke the wall of silence was Miu-chan.

"Onee-chan, even if you do nothing and just stay in this house, I am already very happy. Although Oji-san is somewhat lacking in the delicacy department, I think he's not wrong as well…… Shouldn't you learn to let yourself relax a bit?"

"Miu……"

Miu-chan's blonde hair fluttered in harmony with her footsteps as she approached Sora-chan. She walked to Sora-chan's side and stroked her head as though she was comforting a child.

"Ahh~ Hina too!"

After seeing that, Hina approached Sora and tried hard to straighten her body so that she could touch Sora-chan's head.

"…… Hina."

Sora-chan bent down her body and extended her hands to hug the both of them.

That moment, Oba-san gently wiped the corner of her eyes as she stood at a side.

"How can this be? Even though they are not related by blood, why does Sora-san resemble Yuri-san so much? It's just too mystifying."

That moment, Miu-chan waved at me as I stood there without an inkling of what to do next.

“Oji-san, aren’t you coming?”

I decided to act in accordance with Miu-chan’s words. Well, we’re a family, after all.

After warming my body with the shower, I immersed myself into the waves of the bathtub.

I stopped thinking, and completely allowed my body to relax in the hot water.

My mind started to clear up—

“Oi-tan, help wash Hina’s hair~”

“…… Oh, okay.”

Being somewhat absent-minded, I went though bath time with Hina that day as well.

After all that happened, I even asked those from Roary to help out in cleaning, and they left one by one after that.

I entrusted a secret to Sako-senpai, and because of that, he was in quite a good mood till the end. And of course, Raika-san and the others supported that decision quite a lot as well. Speaking of which, regarding Sora-chan’s problem…… What in the world should I do about it?

“Hina, turn your head over.”

“’Kay~”

Hina obediently moved her head.

After I allowed her long hair to pass through the hole of the shower cap, I put the cap on Hina’s small head.

“Remember to close your eyes tightly.”

“’Kay!”

After making sure that Hina closed her eyes, I poured out the shampoo.

After that, I gently rubbed Hina’s hair to create bubbles.

“Bubbles, bubbles~”

Mimicking my actions, Hina started to scratch her own hair as well.

After doing this for some time, Hina might be able to learn how to wash her hair by herself.

Although this might make us feel somewhat lonesome, people will still grow up.

Women are both slender and complicated. I wanted Sora-chan to relax a bit just because I thought that she helped out too much, but this made her suffer instead. I, as a newbie father, is just so useless.

“Let Oi-tan have bubbles too!”

Hina, don’t bubble my legs while I'm thinking.

“Hina, your hair is so long. Is it about time for you to have a haircut?”

“No~ Has to be longer~”

“Why? Won’t it be troublesome when you’re playing if your hair is too long?”

“Don’t wanna~”

Although I wasn’t too sure about it, Hina definitely had something to be persistent of.

Even though she was young, Hina was still a girl.

After thoroughly foaming her hair, what’s next would be the conditioner.

Not long before this, I still thought that it would suffice to use just shampoo on children, but after being thoroughly scolded by Miu-chan after that, I now remember to put on conditioner for Hina.

However, this is quite tough.

Not only is Hina's hair long, there was a large number of them as well, so it's rather laborious to handle.

I carefully applied the conditioner on each strand of Hina's hair and attentively washed off the conditioner after that.

It was quite a time-consuming task. That's right, it was so time-consuming that Hina felt bored halfway through the process.

"Not done yet?"

"Please wait for a bit more. Ah! Hey! Don't move."

"Hina is bored!"

"Fine, fine, I get it."

I must respect our princess' wishes with all my might.

I decided to wash away all of the conditioner in one go with the shower.

"Here, remember to close your eyes."

"Waa~"

With water showering her head, Hina looked quite happy.

After that, I first allowed Hina to immerse herself in the bathtub, and it was my turn to wash my hair.

I quickly finished washing my hair, and covered my body with foam.

I only use something like hair conditioner only once in a while.

"Hot water bath ♪ Hot water bath ♪ Whoosh rumble rumble ♪"

Hina immediately started to sing as she saw the hot water flow out of the bathtub due to my volume.

But hey, Oi-tan thinks ‘rumble’ doesn’t really seem right.

“Hina, let me ask you.”

“What is it~?”

Without further thought, I asked Hina naturally:

“How did Mama’s hamburger steak taste lik?”

“Um~ Nnn~ …… Mama’s taste. A bit bitter.”

“Is that so? Then that should be so. Hmm…… Then it’s about time to go out. Hina, bathe your shoulders in the water and count to ten.

“Okay, one, two, three……”

Hina’s voice resounded in the bathroom. That moment, I was suddenly shocked.

“H- Hina!? What did you say the hamburger steak tasted like again?!”

“Eh?”

Hina wore a puzzled expression.

I felt that I seemed to have heard a completely unpredictable answer, and that was the breakthrough point that would allow us to remake her Mama’s taste.

After exiting the bathroom, I walked towards the fridge.

What I wanted to locate was the box of tomato sauce that was hidden in the fridge.

I knew that one would definitely have a stomachache if he eats that. However, today, I think that trying it once more will be rewarding.

Perhaps because of embarrassment, Sora-chan looked at me at a side somewhat shyly.

I sniffed it after taking the container out of the fridge. It seems like letting it defrost naturally will be better.

“Onii-chan…… What are you doing?”

Sora-chan realized my thoughts.

“I want to try it once again.”

“Eh……? But hasn’t it already gone bad?”

“It seems like I made a mistake…… This…… might not be tomato sauce.”

An expression of disbelief appeared on Sora-chan’s face.

“Anyways, just leave this to me. Sora-chan, you can’t let yourself get sick now, can you?”

“Ngh…… But……”

To show that she wanted to do something as well, Sora-chan might feel bad again if she only says that. Thus, I decided to tell her something else.

“Sora-chan, about Christmas, actually…… I have another thing that I want to do.”

“Eh? There’s already Hina’s Christmas party, my concert, and the party at night. There’s still going to be something else?”

“Yes. However, that does count as a part of the party……”

After listening to my plan, Sora-chan’s expression immediately brightened.

Just seeing Sora-chan’s expression made the various hardships that I hated vanish in a flash.

Fortunately, it was a sunny day.

It was the day of the kindergarten’s Christmas party, and the day of Sora-chan’s Christmas concert as well.

The weather forecast forecasted that it would turn cloudy and rain at night, while some places would even snow.

Just thinking that it might be a snowing white Christmas made people feel full of hope for the weather forecast.

When Miu-chan went out to send Hina to the kindergarten, I immediately started making the bento.

The ingredients would be the stuff contained in the container that Nee-san left, and also the product of our cooperation.

What’s left was to see what Hina thought about it.

“Well then, I’m going out first. Onii-chan, don’t you miss the time for you to bring Hina the bento!”

Hearing Sora-chan’s words, I nodded determinedly. But of course. After all, the first stage today would be the bento.

After Sora-chan left, I took out my cellphone to contact Oba-san. After that, I headed to the station, delving deep into the complicated underground construction and quickly walked towards my destination.

“Yuuta, too slow.”

Over there, I saw Raika-san, Nimura and Sako-senpai who arrived beforehand.

First, we had to do the preparatory work for our party. After that part ended, the time for us to test the true capability of the bento would arrive.

“Oi-tan and Nee-tan are slow~”

Miu consoled Hina, who was looking around, trying to locate Sora and Yuuta. In the morning, parents who volunteered decorated the classroom. The Christmas party would only start officially after lunch…… That was what the itenary stated.

“However, Yuuta-san and the others are indeed somewhat slow.”

In slight worry, Oba-san looked down at her watch and started to mutter that it might have been better if she made it.

As it was almost time for Yuuta and her sister to arrive, even Miu couldn’t help but start to worry.

“It’ll be lunch time after thirty minutes…… Is it possible that the bento won’t make it in time?”

It was only a few short days after the commotion caused by the bento when Sora, who finally calmed down, decided to concentrate on her fast looming Christmas concert while Yuuta was put in charge of the bento. The arrangement finally ended the argument, but…… in truth, Miu wasn’t too sure of how the bento turned out.

Actually, Miu was requested by Yuuta to taste the bento as well.

However, what she tasted that time was actually just a rather ordinary hamburger steak…… Any feeling that it was Yuri-san's taste did not arise.

And after he saw Miu's expression that time, Yuuta only smiled wryly…… So what in the world happened in the end?

"Hehe! Hina can eat Mama's bento today!"

Seeing her little sister who held such anticipations, a hint of unease surfaced in Miu's heart.

Of course, the bento that Oji-san worked hard to make would definitely be the best, and even Hina will most certainly understand that. However—

Just at that moment, Sora ran over with a flustered expression.

"Sorry we're late!"

"Geez! The decorations are almost completely done!"

"But, the bento is done as well!"

Sora raised the large multi-layered bento container to eye level.

"Has it succeeded, Onee-chan?"

"It should be fine. Onii-chan looks quite confident as well."

Hearing her words, Miu finally relaxed slightly.

After all, Miu was quite sure of how much Hina was looking forward to the bento that day.

Speaking of which, Yuuta himself still didn't appear. The pointers of the clock almost overlapped at the top.

"What's wrong with Oji-san? He's so slow."

"…… Onii-chan said that he won't be late, but……"

Just when Sora started to worry as well, she heard panicked footsteps quickly approaching.

The footsteps caused Hina to raise her head all of a sudden, while Miu and Sora looked towards the direction of the sound at the same time.

"Hina! Sora-chan, Miu-chan, sorry for the wait!"

And the person who appeared there, was Yuuta, who had on him so much sweat that it would make people wonder how one could sweat so much even in such a cold winter.

Although it was a Christmas party, there was some time for the children at the kindergarten to perform their talents as well.

Oba-san and Miu-chan who entered the venue first, had already helped with the decorations of the venue along with the other guardians.

This time, Hina didn't have any special performance. There was a short Christmas play by the elder children.

Just like that, the event climax of our family would completely depend on the bento that I made.

Although I almost mistook the time due to the preparations of the night party, fortunately, I still made it to lunch!

"Geez! You're just too slow, Oji-san!"

Miu-chan changed to a relieved smile.

But just in case, I asked Sora-chan to bring the bento over beforehand as well.

“Sorry, sorry. Hina, this is Mama’s bento, you know!”

“Eh! Where’s Mama? Just the bento!?”

Hina immediately showed a disappointed expression.

Although it felt quite terrible, it was already within our expectations. I told Hina with a smile.

“I already told you that Mama can’t come since she’s too busy. It’s the same for both Mama and Papa. But they still worked hard to make and bring the bento over, so Hina, you should thank them well.”

“But…… Uuu…… But……”

Tears filled Hina’s eyes. As she normally held them back, it was probably even harder for her to refrain herself from crying then.

“Hina, you’ll eat the bento that Oi-tan helped Mama to bring, right?”

I slowly opened the lid, exposing the colorful food inside.

“Wa……”

Among them, there were a lot of food that Hina liked such as onigiri, *tatsuta age* that Sora-chan learnt from Oba-san, traditional potato salad that Raika-san made, stewed vegetables that Oba-san was good at making, simmered hijiki that the Kitahara family sent over, and also the adorable themed boiled egg that Miu-chan made. The fruit punch that Nimura made was kept in another layer.

Among them, I took out Hina’s very favorite.

“Look, here’s the hamburger stake that Mama made.”

I handed the work that I was confident of that was filled in a small plate to Hina. Its appearance was that of an ordinary hamburger steak.

“That’s right, we’ll have to add some tomato sauce.”

I took out the tomato sauce that was kept in a small packet and drew out two cute circles on the hamburger steak.

“This is the hamburger steak for Hina, who couldn’t see Mama, but still tried hard to tolerate it. Enjoy.”

“…… Nn!”

The obedient Hina wiped away the tears that almost trickled down and picked up her fork.

“…… W- Wait a minute…… Yuuta-san, is it really okay for you to put it that way……?”

Looking rather worried, Oba-san quietly spoke by my ears.

“…… If you did it wrong, it’ll be really too bad for Hina-san.”

“I think that it’s fine.”

Before I started to explain, Miu-chan spoke first.

“After all, no matter what time, Oji-san always chooses the best option for us. Isn’t that right, Onee-chan?”

“…… Nn, I think Hina will definitely be able to understand.”

Thus, Oba-san could only nod with a wry smile. Hey, though it’s all fine and all, wasn’t that a statement with failure as a premise?

“But….. Yuri-san’s hamburger steak, should have used homemade tomato sauce……”

“…… If an adult eats that, that should be so, but……”

To Sora-chan, who looked somewhat helpless, I said with a triumphant smile.

“Eh?”

Seeing their surprised expression made me quite happy. This time, I am truly confident about this.

Hina widened her mouth and bit the hamburger steak.

“U, uu……. Ah!”

“What is it, Hina?”

“This is Mama’s hamburg steak! Different from the shops’! Different from Raika-chan’s!”

Hina immediately gave a radiant smile, but then tears started to fall on the next instant.

“It’s great…… Mama didn’t forget Hina……”

The words hidden in her heart that she never told anyone, the longing that the three year old girl had, all of them leaked out that moment.

“Mama…… Mama’s hamburg steak. Mama, Hina will eat them all up!”

As though Hina saw Nee-san, she started to gobble the food all up.

As her eyes teared up as she saw Hina like that, Sora-chan started to praise me.

“So Onii-chan really did find the recipe for the hamburger steak. That’s great, Hina.”

“It’s all thanks to everyone.”

Although I, myself, am quite confident, it's seriously great that things could actually have gone so smoothly. That moment, Miu-chan pinched a small piece of hamburger steak with her fingers in curiosity, while Oba-san and Sora-chan did the same.

"It's been a while since I ate this. Yuri-san's hamburger steak…… Itadakimasu!"

Everyone inserted the hamburger steak into their mouths at the same time.

"…… Eh?"

"…… It's just a normal hamburger steak, nothing special at all. Even I can make it."

"Onii-chan, what's wrong with this!?"

Comparing the surprised expressions of the trio with that of Hina's, who was happily eating her hamburger steak, made me quite amused.

"Yes, if an adult eats it, it would indeed be just an ordinary hamburger steak. You can only distinguish it with extra attention."

"Geez! Stop beating around the bush! Hurry up and say it!"

Well, I only noticed this after so much effort after all, of course I feel like showing off.

"Sora-chan, do you remember the box we found in the fridge?"

"Ah…… The stuff that Onii-chan said that it looked like tomato sauce, but wasn't……"

"Yes, that was actually vegetable juice. But since they weren't blended, does it count as vegetable sauce instead? As there were carrots and tomatoes inside, we were fooled by the red color."

“Eh……?”

That instant, only Oba-san wore a look of realization.

“I understand now. So that’s how things are. …… If so, it isn’t strange that an adult wouldn’t notice it, whereas Hina-san could easily distinguish it.”

“Why?”

Sora-chan and the others asked curiously.

“I think Nee-san probably wanted the picky Hina to eat more vegetables, so she mixed vegetables into various dishes. She froze shredded vegetable and mixed them in food. It is quite commonly used to wean babies off milk. That was why Nee-san prepared that box so that she could make it any time she liked.”

It was especially suitable to be used on hamburger steak, dumpling and so on.

That was why the hamburger steaks that Nee-san made were most certain those that looked like meat at first glance, but actually contained a lot of vegetables.

Naturally, the dish that was filled with love from Nee-san was different from the hamburger steaks sold at restaurants or made by other adults. Adults almost couldn’t notice any different even when a little tomato sauce was used on the hamburger steak, but it would still be different to children’s sensitive tongues.

This is similar to the statement that the bitterness of green pepper would be a few times stronger to children than to adults.

“That’s why…… This really is Nee-san’s hamburger steak. That box of sauce made me think of this.”

Well, though it made me enter the washroom a whole three times just to confirm the fact…… Let's not mention that right now.

The efforts that Nee-san put in to allow Hina to live on healthily made Hina feel happiness once more.

"Hina, Oi-tan learnt how to make the hamburger steak from Mama. So, that means you can eat it whenever you like."

After she heard my words, Hina's eyes widened. After she stared at me for some time……

"…… Nnn~ Oi-tan, if it's not made by Mama, Hina wants to eat Oba-tan's and Nee-tan's more. Raika-chan's was tasty too!"

"Eh!?""

As though nothing happened, Hina continued to eat the hamburger steak with her head lowered.

This…… This is truly out of my expectations. Although the hamburger steak that contained vegetables indeed had her Mama's taste, Hina actually liked to eat hamburger steak made purely by steak more? W- Well, that's true. How honest of her……

As I ran into a snag, I looked at Sora-chan and the others' expressions…… Everyone couldn't help but laugh out loud.

After that, we filled our bellies with the bento that we brought, feeling exceptionally satisfied.

Hina wore an expression that suggested that she was so happy that she couldn't ask for anything more as well.

"Well then, that means we already fulfilled one of the promises, and can relax a bit more."

In relief, I said while winking at Sora-chan.

“Nn, got it. Next on would be me. To return everyone’s thoughts for allowing me to rest, I shall show the fruits of my efforts as well.”

Sora-chan stood up after saying that.

When we stayed for awhile to watch the Christmas play, Sora-chan had to go first to prepare for her concert.

While we saw her off with our support.

Sora waited for her turn to go on stage in the waiting room.

When it was less than ten minutes left until the concert started, Sora realized that her legs were continually trembling.

“Eh? Eh…….”

What to do……?

Just when the stage was about to be unveiled, and everyone had to move quickly to their positions, the sudden situation caused Sora’s heartbeat to accelerate, while her body stiffened as well.

“Breathe…… I have to breathe……”

Sora felt that it was hard for her to breathe, as though something was blocking her throat……

If that went on, she might not be able to sing when she heard the directions for them to go on stage.

On the instant she had the thought, terror caused Sora to be unable to move.

Even though I can't fail since Yuuta and the others are coming. And it just so happens that this happens at a time when I can't fail…… The thought further intensified Sora's tension. Just when Sora was so nervous that she couldn't stand it, someone put their hand on Sora's shoulder. At the same time, the formless shackles dispersed along it. Sora couldn't help but turn around for a look.

"…… Ah."

"Are you still okay? If you're still nervous, there's still me by your side."

The person who told that to Sora with a smile was her best friend.

"Youko……"

"Ahhhhhhh! Hanamura, you're actually *still* here, just when I wanted to talk to Takanashi……"

For some reason, Daiki was behind Youko, frozed there in a strange pose of a hand extended. Youko turned around to peer at Daiki and showed him a triumphant smile. Daiki made an odd sound with his face red, while Shuuji immediately went forward to halt Daiki after pushing his glasses upwards as he saw the situation. Sora heard something like 'Bad timing, I'm just too unlucky', 'You're not Hanamura-san's match' and the like, but she couldn't understand what that meant.

"I- I say, this……"

Daiki shoved something in front of Sora.

"This…… What is this, Maeshima-kun?"

"…… Bento. Our family usually eat this type of bento. This is for you."

"Bento……? Is it possible……"

Why does Maeshima-kun know about that? Besides, that matter had already been dealt with.

“T- The onigiri inside…… were made by me! So, you’ll have to try one!”

“…… Actually I just ate a bento just now.”

Sora-chan said, somewhat troubled, opening the bento container that Daiki gave her at the same time. Inside, there were onigiris that were somewhat deformed, fried chicken and other dishes that seemed to be favorites of boys. Apart from that, there was a hamburger steak as well.

Looking at the bento, a strange sense of warmth blossomed in Sora’s heart. *That’s right, it’s the same for everyone, working hard with all their might.*

“Hehe, I’ll have one then.”

Sora picked a smaller onigiri that had carp eggs inside. Her originally tense feelings relaxed slightly as well.

“…… It’s really delicious.”

As he saw Sora’s smile, Daiki’s whole face reddened for some reason.

“It seems like we’re all ready! Everyone, let’s go! We’re showing them our best side!”

After giving an order as though she wanted to go for a fight, Kiyomi took the lead and walked outside, while Sora and the others hurriedly followed as they saw that.

On the instant they arranged their positions as rehearsed, the introduction of the master of the ceremony started as well. Although that gave Sora the feeling of wanting to run away on the last instant, the stressful shackles that seemed to be tightly binding her body had already disappeared.

“D- Do your best! Takanashi-san!”

Everyone who stood diagonally in front of Sora turned around to say to her. Shuuji and Youko looked at Sora with their heads slightly raised as well.

"…… Definitely!"

At the same time when Sora nodded while responding, the curtains were lifted.

In the hall where all lights were turned off, only the lights on the stage were lit.

"Merry Christmas! Everyone, welcome to the Christmas Charity Concert!"

The MC started the introduction for the concert.

There was still some time before Sora's school went on stage, so we could still relax and enjoy the show.

As it was a Christmas party, the contents of the performances were themed on Christmas carols.

Among them, the show was designed for children to sing along, so the three year old Hina happily started to sing as well.

Just like that, it was Sora-chan's turn to go on stage.

Seeing the curtains fall as the previous school ended their performance, my heartbeat accelerated in a flash.

"Oi-tan, where's Nee-tan?"

Sitting on my lap, Hina asked with her head raised.

"S- S- Sora-chan…… S- S- She's going on stage soon! Hina!"

"Wa! Hina Nee-tan is going on stage!"

“Oji-san, your voice cracked, you know?”

Sitting by my side, Miu-chan said while laughing.

“A- A- After all, I’m really nervous! This is the stage for my all-important Sora-chan to show her skills……”

If…… No, that can’t be so. But if by any chance she failed…… How distressed would Sora-chan be? Just thinking of it made me feel scared!

“Relax, Oji-san. Our Onee-chan is really capable.”

“That’s right!”

Urgh! A guardian being consoled by a primary school student, seriously……

“It’s just that her nerves get to her sometimes……”

“M- Miu-chan!”

“However, at critical moments, Onee-chan will definitely do her best.”

Miu-chan, who was proudly praising her sister, looked quite dazzling.

Since she trusts Sora-chan so much, how can I not trust in her!

When the curtains rose, among the lined-up students wearing the same uniform, there was a familiar face.

“It’s Nee-tan!”

“Shhh! Hina, quietly listen to your sister sing.”

I didn’t need to specially locate Sora-chan’s position at all. She was just at the very front of the choir stage. As she was the only person to stand there, she naturally became the center of everyone’s focus.

I felt pride as a guardian, and at the same time, there was a feeling that my gut was tightly clenched.

Do your best!

Sora-chan started to breathe in deeply.

On the next instant, Sora-chan’s voice gracefully rang without music accompanying it.

The voice that was somewhat quiet at first gradually spread throughout the whole venue.

It was a very clear voice.

A hymn.

Although it was a song that even I once heard before, the emotions that I felt while listening to it was completely different.

Sora-chan’s elegant voice, clearly, strongly sang of the holy night.

Her voice rang in each corner of the hall. It was hard for one to imagine that the voice was actually from such a small body. Not long after that, the members standing behind Sora-chan started to sing in harmony as well, while the accompaniment melody started as well. The song that was solemn at first turned into a rowdy, happy chorus in an instant.

“Wow! Awesome!”

I heard someone saying that somewhere behind me. Yes, that’s absolutely right.

The song that had Sora-chan’s solo singing blended in time after time gradually reached its climax.

In the end, only Sora-chan’s graceful voice was left again.

The last note slowly disappeared.

When the singing ended, a torrent of applause rang on the instant everyone in the Choir Club bowed at the same time.

And of course, Hina, Miu-chan, Oba-san, Shiori-chan and I applauded with all our might as well.

“Nee-tan is so cool! Cool!”

“Nnn! Sora-chan is the best!”

“Onee-chan is really awesome!”

The audience’s applause was so enthusiastic that Sora-chan looked quite surprised on stage, while that made us smile naturally.

“Sora-chan’s performance was excellent!”

By Miu-chan’s side, Shiori-chan gave Sora-chan such praise while clapping her hands.

This is great, Sora-chan! Everyone in the Choir Club was great as well!

It’s so fortunate that Sora-chan returned to her club. I had such thoughts while I was applauding.

Just when I was feeling touched, a familiar, rough voice suddenly rang by my side.

“Whoaaaaaaa! Youko! Youkooooooo!”

That’s right, it was my senpai from the Rugby Club who helped me out a lot regarding my part time jobs.

“Oh! Segawa! So you came as well! The both of us have good little sisters, don’t we!”

— I never thought that both Sora-chan and Hanamura-senpai’s little sister would be in the Choir Club. I was really shocked.

Just like that, the holy night gradually reached its climax.

“Aren’t you a bit too slow, Segawa-kun!”

When we reached a small shop in a busy district near the Ikebukuro station, it was already past eight o’ clock. We hurriedly ran down the stairs leading to the basement floor.

On the walls along the road, there were decorations giving off a Christmas mood as well. I heard that it was a shop opened by a friend with a good relationship with Sako-senpai, which was why it was lent to the Roary for the whole day.

The results of our rushing here and there from the morning could be seen from the level of the decorations at the Christmas party.

“S- Sorry! It’s because Sora-chan and the Choir Club won a place…… That was why we’re late.”

While saying so, I really couldn’t refrain a smile from leaving my eyes.

No matter how you look at it, the reason they won was all because of Sora-chan. Even when one does not look at it from a biased angle, it would still be most certainly true.

“Sora-chan’s solo part was really awesome~”

Just when I was so happy that my whole face almost fell down, the back of my head was knocked on.

“Ack!”

“Calm down, Yuuta. We went as well.”

It was Raika-san. The size of the thing that she was holding was exaggeratedly large, but it seemed to be a cracker.

It’s just that allowing such a large thing to burst open felt rather dangerous……

“Yeah, yeah. Since we entered through other ways, we didn’t meet inside. Sora-chan and the others’ performance was exceptionally professional, and they had quite an enthusiastic response. Being able to get a prize among so many people, Sora-chan is indeed great.”

“Don’t say that…… The great one wasn’t me, but everyone in the Choir Club.”

Although Sora-chan’s smile was rather shy, it still exposed a hint of delight.

“Nee-tan was gweat!”

“Yeah, Hina, you’ll have to congratulate Sora Nee-chan.”

Just like that, everyone congratulated Sora-chan at the same time.

“Thank you…… Thank you, everyone. Not only for Christmas…… but for taking care of me daily as well. I’m really grateful. After this, I’m in your care as well.”

With tears swirling in her eyes, Sora-chan thanked everyone.

“Fufufu, well aren’t you gentle today, Sora-kun.”

Sako-senpai appeared with a mischievous smile.

“Actually, the Christmas party today is one that we designed specially, and does count as a celebratory party for you as well, so you’ll have to have a huge ton of fun. That’s right, uniform, choir uniform, Christmas outfit, which one do you want to pick?”

“Eh? What does that mean?”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Okay! Let’s party!”

Under Sako-senpai's orders, we started to enjoy the party.

Everyone's faces brimmed over with smiles.

It seems like parties have the magical ability to put people in a good mood.

"B- But, why must we do this!"

Sora-chan, who changed into her choir outfit once again, gave a wail due to the strange situation, while other people wore cosplay outfits, mainly Christmas outfits as well.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Isn't this fine? It's beautiful."

"Sora-chan is so cute. Yuuta, give her to me."

The two senior citizens already started to ask for unreasonable requests.

"No. Speaking of which, so it's a plan like this?"

"Yep. It's absolutely necessary for Christmas, while I planted the clothes at your house beforehand as well."

…… What detailed planning.

"Wa wa! So many Santa Clauses! There was one at the kindergarten too!"

"Really? But was there a Santa Claus as handsome as me?"

"Eh? Hahahahaha!"

Nimura, who played as Santa Claus, started to play with Hina while fully expressing his handsome guy style.

By the way, I costumed as Santa Claus as well, and it was the same for Raika-san and Sako-senpai.

"Here, this is for everyone!"

Miu-chan handed small, cute packages to everyone one by one.

In there, there were cute-looking imported ornaments and rare imported desserts.

“Eh…… Isn’t it written here that it’s snot flavored? Is this really fine?”

“Oji-san, you really must have a taste.”

Happy laughter could be heard everywhere.

“Well then, now for my present!”

As though she was emphasizing that she definitely won’t forget to prepare presents, Sora-chan handed the presents that she prepared to everyone. She prepared small cakes that included a card.

“I secretly learnt how to make it from Oba-san! It’s probably fine if isn’t a bento, isn’t it? I baked a lot, so apart from the part you can take back, you can eat all you like over here as well!”

Sora-chan gives people the feeling that she just couldn’t stand losing regarding this matter as well.

“Mine is this, everyone has it.”

The present that Raika-san gave to everyone was a self-made book cover.

“Hope Yuuta won’t forget to bring his reports again.”

While hearing everyone laughing, I could only feel ashamed with my face red.

When Sako-senpai’s present that was full of amusement and Nimura’s self-made cake showed up, the atmosphere of the party livened up even more.

And after that, it was my turn. I faced Raika-san first.

“Raika-san, this is for you.”

The present that I gave to her was the small handbag that she once said that she liked.

It was a rather cute thing that felt like those that were used by children.

“Raika-san, thank you for telling me what you like. It helped out a lot while I was picking presents.”

I did my best to make a smile, but I didn’t know if it was successful or not.

Raika-san wore a smile, and I think it was one that even people other than me could distinguish.

“Thank you, Yuuta. I’ll treasure it.”

After that, it was Sora-chan’s turn. I handed a box to the beautiful girl who still wore a nervous expression and was chewing on turkey meat.

“…… Thank you, can I open it?”

But of course. After I nodded in response, the box was opened before my eyes, while the results of my shopping was exposed.

“This is…… a necklace? One that I can keep photos in as well……”

“Well, you seem to always have a photo on you, so I thought that you might need this.”

I knew that Sora-chan always kept her family photo by her side.

After that, I handed the same thing to Miu-chan and Hina.

“Hina, you can keep Papa and Mama’s photos inside after this as well. And also, this is the bunny doll that I promised you.”

“This is gweat! Thank you!”

Seeing Hina's overwhelmingly delighted expression as though she would even get drunk by drinking orange juice, I extended my hand to stroke her small head.

"…… Thank you, Oji-san."

As for Miu-chan, she gave a smile that felt somewhat lonely.

Just like that, our Christmas party continued to bustle with noise.

Although quite a lot happened, right now, everyone have smiles on them.

At the same time, I recalled from the bottom of my heart regarding the hardships and importance of realizing an ordinary life.

"That's right, Hina, do you have the letter you wrote to Santa Claus on you?"

"Nnn!"

As she answered happily, Hina rummaged in her bag for awhile and returned to the party after handing a piece of paper back to me.

I opened the piece of drawing paper alone.

On the paper, a couple wearing smiles was drawn on it, while between them, there was a girl whose hands were held by them.

Those were probably Nee-san and Nii-san, as well as Hina.

No, not only that.

By the couple's sides, there were people that looked somewhat like Sora-chan and Miu-chan.

On the other hand, the person behind was probably me.

On the corner of the paper, a lot of people was drawn on it as well.

Raika-san, Nimura, Sako-senpai…… Everyone were inside.

Hina still couldn’t write.

That’s why, that drawing was probably drawn by Hina due to her wanting Santa Claus to know about her longing of her Papa and Mama. However, Hina, you’re really a kind child.

After all, you probably wanted to see them with us, didn’t you?

While having a warm and fuzzy feeling, I carefully kept the drawing paper.

Because, this is an important thought that I want to treasure forever.

Epilogue

The feast continued until late night.

Unknowingly, a crowd of white fairies descended elegantly from the night skies, while the Ikebukuro streets turned into a rare silver world in a flash.

Smiles, smiles, endless smiles.

Hina, whose face was full of butter, was excitedly enjoying the feast.

Usually, it would already be Hina's sleep time, but it was a special day. Sako-senpai stayed at a side to take care of Hina with a look of satisfaction as well.

Miu-chan and Nimura were singing intimately, but I'll forgive that specially for today.

As for me, I was in charge of taking care of Raika-san, whose face was unusually red, while I enjoyed the pleasure of doing so. But for some reason, the task was snatched away by Sora-chan, making me slightly sad.

It was almost like a dream.

Being able to see Sora-chan and the others enjoy Christmas happily like any other people really made me feel happy.

However, time will only flow continually.

Thinking of that, I raised my head to look at the clock and noticed that it was almost time when Cinderella's magic lost its effect.

Well then, it's almost time for the grand finale.

After signaling to Raika-san and the others, I made a light cough.

"Okay, let's start."

After I gave such a signal, Sora-chan and the other members of Roary made mischievous smiles one after another.

“Eh? What? Start what?”

“Ah! Hina too, Hina too!”

“Oh, of course Hina is in this as well. Don’t you remember that you gave us some of your pocket money as well?”

Although it was taken with her permission, it didn’t seem like Hina was clear about the situation.

“Ehh~ Only I don’t know about this?!”

The considerate blonde second sister puffed out her cheeks in displeasure.

“That’s so mean of you~”

“Ahaha! Our apologies. Then let us start right away!”

Sora-chan and Raika-san almost flew to the back of the shop, and returned with a beautiful cloth. It was a kimono with sakura flowers drawn on the black material radiating a beautiful luster.

“Eh……? A kimono? Isn’t this Christmas?”

“Yes, it is a kimono, and it is indeed Christmas.”

We smiled as we saw Miu-chan’s look of puzzlement.

“After Hina’s Shichi-Go-San ended…… We didn’t manage to locate the photos of your three year old Shichi-Go-San, right? So that made me feel rather mindful of it……”

“Ahaha…… You don’t need to be so…….”

Probably because it was completely out of her expectations, Miu-chan looked rather flustered.

“So that’s when I thought, let’s organize another Shichi-Go-San in place of Miu-chan’s three-year-old Shichi-Go-San. This is the present we are going to give to you. This kimono was rented by using everyone’s money just for today as well.”

“Isn’t it great? Miu-chan! Onii-chan thought of this idea!”

“Nee-tan! Wear it, wear it!”

Seeing her sisters’ excited looks, Miu-chan looked as though she wasn’t sure what to do.

“Ah, but…… Um……”

“To wear the kimono, I can help out.”

Miu-chan walked behind the shop along with Raika-san’s accompaniment.

After some effort, a beautiful blonde girl in a kimono appeared before everyone’s eyes.

“Ohoho…… Splendid! Beautiful! Excellent!”

Sako-senpai roared while making a happy noise.

“…… It fits you quite well, Miu-chan. That kimono is the same color of flower as the kimono that Yuri Nee-san wore when she was in primary school. You’re the same as Hina-san and Nee-san.”

And of course, the person who found the kimono was Sako-senpai. His mobility was quite reliable at these times.

Miu-chan looked at us in turn at a loss of words.

At first, she wore a hesitant expression…… and slowly raised her head after that.

The paper umbrella that we allowed Miu-chan to hold as decoration suited her exceptionally well. She almost looked like a beautiful girl who walked out from a portrait.

“Sheesh, nobody wears kimonos on Christmas……”

Miu-chan slowly, falteringly spoke.

After that, she slowly spun in a circle and showed us a smile, tears filling her eyes.

“But…… Thank you.”

Miu-chan wore a radiant smile, teardrops falling from her eyes at the same time.

However, those weren’t tears of sorrow.

Even I understood that they were tears of happiness.

At the same time, it was proof that Miu-chan, who usually supported us with her smile, already understood everyone’s thoughts.

She, who never expressed a capricious side…… was definitely always pushing herself.

Just like Sora-chan.

Although it might be somewhat strange for one to wear a kimono on Christmas, it was the present that I wanted to give Miu-chan the most.

To me, the daily life that anyone could treat as a given was a rather difficult thing.

My power was just not enough. If not for Sora-chan and everyone's help, not only the Christmas party, I might have even forgotten to buy presents for today as well.

I couldn't even realize the fact that Miu-chan was feeling lonely as she saw us happily fooling around during Shichi-Go-San.

However, we can still come back, we can start over whenever we like.

Because we are still together.

And everyone is by my side.

Family, friends, and those who have helped me.

Thanks to everyone, that was why I wanted to try hard within the range of my capabilities to provide them the happiness that was treated as a given to everyone else.

After all, Miu-chan, Sora-chan and Hina's happiness is my happiness as well.

Of course, it is the same for Raika-san, Oba-san, Nimura, Shiori-chan and Sako-senpai.

Just at that moment, Miu-chan gave me another present.

"…… Thank you, Papa."

Hearing her words, it was like I was the winner already.

Because I heard the most sincere feelings of the considerate little devil young beauty.

I felt like the distance between us shortened once more.

After that, the four of us took a commemorative photo.

Though the style of the clothing didn't quite match……

However, we are absolutely a true family.

After this, it will definitely come true no matter how much happiness we want.

After taking the commemorative photo, Miu-chan gently leaned towards me.

"Thanks a lot, Oji-san. I'll keep the photo form today in the necklace you gave to me."

And then……

Miu-chan kissed my cheek.

"A- Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

For some reason, Sora-chan howled when she saw the scene.

"Whoaaaaa! I want Miu-sama's indirect kiss!"

Sako-senpai leapt at me at the same time as well.

"Wa! Wawawawa! G- Give me a break!"

My look while trying to run away caused the whole place to be filled with laughter.

Like the descending snowflakes, laughter continued to fall between us.

The next morning, a small episode occurred.

When I was brushing my teeth while humming a song, Hina squeezed to my front with a smile.

"Oh! Do you want to wash your face?"

“Nn!”

I started to help Hina wash her face.

“Oi-tan, Hina wants to tell you good news~”

“Oh? What good news would that be?”

“Yesterday, Santa Claus came!”

Hoho, Hina was probably referring to us, huh?

“Santa Claus fulfilled Hina’s wish!”

“It’s the bunny doll, right? That’s great.”

“That’s not it~ Oi-tan gave that~”

After hearing Hina laugh in delight, I couldn’t understand what she was saying in an instant.

“Then when did Santa Claus come?”

“Um……. Um…… When Hina was asleep!”

Ngh, it does seem to be true according to the legends, but even if I couldn’t make a chimney appear, should I have prepared socks for Hina?

“Hina made a wish to Santa Claus! Hina said Hina wants to see Papa and Mama!”

Hina’s words were completely out of my expectations.

I didn’t know how to answer.

As I recall, the wish that the kindergarten asked Hina to write turned out to be a family portrait, causing me to be unable to react for the moment.

However……

“Then, what did Santa Claus say?”

“Sheesh~ Hina said that it came true! Yesterday, Hina saw Papa and Mama!”

“Eh?!”

Seeing my startled look, Hina laughed happily.

“And we talked a lot~ In yesterday’s dream!”

After saying that, Hina happily ran outside, looking as though she was indeed in deep happiness.

Hina probably wanted to tell them.

“…… Haha, true parents are indeed powerful.”

It seems like compared with the holy night miracle that Nee-san and Nii-san gave Hina, I have a long way to go.

In a happy mood, I stretched forcefully under the winter sky.

Afterword

I realized that recently, the time for me to read seemed to have decreased a lot.

Although writing a book, causing the time for me to read books to decrease seems to be fine according to the law of equivalent exchange, to me, who can waste time endlessly when it concerns books, the internet and video games, it's indeed rather lonely.

Just like that, I tried to check out my receipts, calculating the ratio of the books bought and books read these two months.

In the recent fifty days, there were 126 mangas, 73 light novels in total, while the read through rate was 45%.

Although most of the manga had been read through, the amount of light novels read did seemed to have decreased substantially. After all, reading through light novels is more time-consuming. But when I mentioned this to my friends, I was actually scolded ' You're fooling around too much!', but is that so……?

Basically, from high school on, each time I got five hundred yen lunch fees, I would use a hundred yen to buy the largest Western bread, leaving the rest to buy books. Compared with that time, I really read a lot less books.

But speaking of the problem, it should be the fact that the walls of my room are filled with books. My bookracks had already been fully filled, while a large stack of books was placed before it as well.

If there's a huge earthquake, causing me to be unluckily buried in a hill of books, I will seriously be in danger. In any case, let's pray that there won't be a Kanto earthquake before 'Papa no Iu Koto o Kikinasai!' and 'Mayoi Neko Overrun!' are finished.

Everyone, long time no see. I'm Tomohiro Matsu, whose body condition has improved slightly recently.

Perhaps because I finally calmed down as I passed through the freakish schedule of publishing four books in five months, returning to the schedule of publishing one

book per month. Just like that, I am currently in an odd mental state as I keep feeling that there's something wrong.

Even so, I still had a more than 39°C fever one week before the deadline, so I could only call the editor and say: 'Sorry, can you delay it for a few days?'. After that, I got the warm encouragement (?) of : 'We'll try to wait till the end! But the deadline won't chance since it's going to be the Golden Week soon!' In the end, I still managed to complete it.

Fortunately, I still successfully returned my life to normal, occasionally watching movies and playing video games. However, the animes accumulated in my hard disk weren't completely finished……

After that, I wanted to have a more energetic way of writing.

That's why I tried to write the third episode of the novel in a more energetic pace. How do you think about it?

I used a whole book to write the story proceeding from Shichi-Go-San to Christmas, spanning for a month. As it was easier to arrange various events, writing it was quite pleasant. Although I still had a lot that I wanted to write, continuing to write it without limit would only make the book thicker, and it will become endless, so it was somewhat of a headache to balance it out.

Nakajima-sensei's illustrations feel quite experienced. Every character feels so cute that they're irresistible. Although I thought of putting the focus on different characters, writing something similar to a short story series, I still want to allow the main storyline to continue to proceed, so I was quite troubled. How good would it be if there are 48 hours in a day……

That's right, speaking of characters, regarding the hair color of the easily deluded high school girl— Kitahara Shiori, it was pink in the illustrations, while it was described as black in the book, so people asked me if there was a mistake. After that, even Nakajima-sensei came over to ask me the same question.

Regarding that part, I have my own explanation, so please allow me to talk about a small past memory. As I entered this world, when I started to take part in the production of a certain brand of a somewhat famous video game, I obtained the chance to get the rights for the continuation of a popular game. Although the female

main character inside was a serious, considerate, obedient child, she had long, pink hair. As I didn't think much about it, and wrote down '~ pink long hair……' and the like in the script. In the end. I was called over by the production team and was scolded: 'For manga, anime and video games, hair color is a brand! Is it possible that there are high school students with green or pink hair in reality! Even if they look pink, they are still black!'

That time, I really felt like I was brought out of my mistakes, and felt that his words were quite justified as well. From that time on, from what I know, no matter what color they are in the illustrations, without special note, the hair color would be black, or variations of brown.

However, describing the color accurately would easily cause confusion, so regarding the hair color, I normally won't describe it in detail, but I accidentally wrote too much for Shiori. Allow me to apologize for this over here.

Here, I wish that the readers can just treat the above as just descriptions. However, there are a lot of my spelling errors and typos, so…… I'm really sorry. I'll definitely notice it more, and continue to work hard.

Lastly, this work could only have been published with many people's help, so thank you for everyone who helped out. To the readers holding this book in their hands right now, I give you my eternal gratitude.

If you are still willing to support, it will be an unrivalled happiness to me.

Matsu Tomohiro